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BIG HORN IKE, THE HILL TRAMP; or, THE ODD PARDS.

BY ROGER STARBUCK,

AUTHOR OF "THE BOY CAPTAIN," "THE BLACK SCHOONER," "FIRE-HEELS," "THE GOLDEN HARPOON," ETC., ETC., ETC.



"GET BACK!" HE CRIED TO BIG HORN. "IF YOU ADVANCE THREE STEPS FURTHER, I WILL THROW THE GIRL OVER THE EDGE OF THE CLIFF!"

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CHAPTER I.

A TIMELY FRIEND.

AROUSSED from a deep slumber just at dawn by a trampling noise and the savage howling of many voices, Ike Ward, or Big Horn Ike, as he was usually termed by his pards, sprung lightly from the bed of leaves which, in a willow grove in Arizona, had served him for a couch during the night.

Although not yet seventeen years old, this boy could show six feet of limb and muscle, with a corresponding breadth of shoulders and length of arms.

The pure air of the Big Horn peaks in Montana, near which he was born and brought up, had helped to give him this vigorous growth and also the good health which he enjoyed. He wore the usual buckskin costume of a hunter, and his polished rifle was in keeping with the neatness of his picturesque attire.

Not far off he now beheld a herd of antelopes pursued by several gaunt wolves.

"Good gracious! Hyar's meat comin' straight fur me!" he cried. "The critters don't see me, as I'm behind this yere tree, and thar'll soon be a chance fur a plumb-center shot."

There were about twenty antelopes in all bounding along over the plain, the early light showing their brownish-yellow backs and sides, with which their white bellies and rumps formed an agreeable contrast. Their eyes protruded from their heads with terror, and their movements were so graceful that they seemed to fairly skim over the surface of the ground without touching it.

Ike lost no time in cocking his piece and holding it in readiness. The antelopes were now approaching his position, but he knew that before they came much nearer the keenness of their scent would betray to them his presence, and that they would then head off away from the grove.

In fact, this soon took place, and bringing his rifle to his shoulder, the boy let fly a bullet at the most tempting animal of the herd.

As he had had much practice in hunting he was an excellent marksman, and the beautiful creature at which he had aimed was struck in the head. It went down upon its knees, endeavored to rise, but could not, and a moment later it fell upon its side, breathing its last.

Ike hoped that the wolves would now keep on after the rest of the herd, but he was disappointed, for they made straight for the animal which was shot.

"The varmints is mortil hungry," muttered the young hunter—"oncommon so, as is showed by the lean bodies and the snapping eyes. I reckon I'm goin' to hev trouble with 'em, for I sart'ly shall not let 'em hev my game."

He had reloaded his piece, and he now advanced so quickly that he got between the dead antelope and the wolves, while the latter were still some hundreds of feet distant.

Taking careful aim, he sent a bullet through the body of one of the monsters, which, tumbling over upon its back with an angry snarl, soon expired.

The two others advanced a few feet nearer the boy, then they turned off in pursuit of the fugitives.

Ike proceeded to cut up the game, and he had possessed himself of a luscious steak, when all at once, he saw the two wolves scampering back toward the thicket from which they had emerged.

"Injuns!" he ejaculated.

He could not see the savages, but he could hear the galloping of their horses, behind a line of trees through which the herd had just passed.

About a hundred yards in his rear, rose the detached peak of a mountain range, and he lost no time in making his way toward it, carrying with him the steak he had obtained. Finally he reached a sort of rocky rampart, on one side of which was a small cave. In this he ensconced himself, keeping a sharp watch for the Indians.

At length he saw them emerge from the line

of trees, in pursuit of the antelopes, which had turned off in an opposite direction.

For some minutes it seemed as if the Indians, mounted on their fleet horses, would keep on after the fugitive animals, leave Ike unmolested. They were fierce-looking fellows of the Apache tribe, mostly armed with tomahawks, lances, bows and arrows.

"Thar they go," muttered the young hunter, as he saw them disappear in the thicket, "and mortil good riddance."

Mounting higher, he finally beheld the savages flying over the country beyond the woods, still following the herd, with which they at length disappeared in the morning mist.

Ike then ventured to kindle a fire, and cook his steak, from which he made an excellent breakfast.

Scarcely had he finished it, when he again heard the trampling of horses, and he had but just time to ensconce himself behind a rock when he saw some of the Apaches emerge from the thicket. Watching them through a crevice in the rock, he counted a dozen, who were approaching the elevation he occupied. He had not had time to extinguish his fire, the smoke of which they had evidently detected.

When within a few paces of the height, they disposed themselves so as to nearly surround it.

"Ugh! who there?" called one.

Ike made no reply. A few of the Indians dismounting from their horses, approached the elevation to ascend it.

"No, thank you," thought the boy. "You don't catch this coon waitin' hyar fur you to come up. I'm off, 'fore yer kin git to this chile."

There was a sort of gully leading downward into a narrow valley, below the precipice.

The youth darted along this passage, which was screened by the branches of some dwarf bushes, and finally reached the valley. The sides of the latter were covered with shrubbery so that he was not seen by the Indians.

As he moved along, he noticed, at the other end of the hollow, the face of a young Indian thrust through the foliage.

Dim as was the light in the hollow, the savage evidently saw him, for, with a grunt, he withdrew, and the boy heard him call to his companions.

"Thar's no help fur it," thought Ike. "I'll hev to make a rush and try to git out 'fore the others come up."

He held his rifle ready for service, and was about to dart toward the end of the valley, when he heard a voice on his right.

"Hist! stranger! I calkulate you'd not better try that! The rapscallions are beaound to git ye if you go that way!"

Looking toward the speaker, Ike beheld a thin face with a protuberant nose, surmounted by a head, covered with tangled masses of tow-colored hair.

The face belonged to a lad about sixteen, whose long, scrawny neck was also visible.

He was looking from a hole in a rock, opening from the bottom of the valley.

"Come," he continued, "if you git into this hole, I guess you'll be safe enough—so come along—dew!"

Ike was soon in the hole, over which the other boy then drew the branches of a bush which he had displaced.

"Neaow, then, if we foller eaour noses we'll come eaout all right at t'other end of the passage," he said.

They kept on, side by side. The passage was a long one, nearly two hundred feet in length, and they finally crawled through the other end, emerging upon the bank of a stream in another valley and having a swift current.

"Don't s'pose you've any objection to stradin' a wooden horse, have ye?" inquired Ike's companion.

"A wooden hoss?"

"Waal, yes. Here it is," and he pointed to a long, thick log, tied by a piece of rope to a sapling on the bank.

"The current," he continued, "will carry us away from these diggin's, where, for awhile, we'll be eout of the reach of the Philistines."

"I never heerd on *that* tribe," said Ike. "The varmints arter us is Apaches."

"Waal, waal, we won't wriggle abeaout terms. Sure's my name is Hezekiah Helper, we've got to work sharp, neaow, to escape."

"You kin bet we hev. I reckon you're a stranger in these parts."

"You hain't though—be ye?"

"I'm used to the kentry."

"I thought so. Waal, I'm from Vermeaount, which, I calkulate, is a considerable piece up north from this place. The facts air this: I

came to these parts to hunt up a live Injun for a museum which I'm going to start, and which 'll be the greatest thing on the face of this airth; twenty-five cents admission for males, and five cents off for females, considering them creatur's is of the gentler sect."

As Hezekiah said this, he drew himself up to his full hight, which was nearly six feet. He was of lanky build, but strong and wiry-looking, with keen, gray eyes and a thin, resolute mouth.

His attire consisted of a hunting-shirt, much too short for him, while a pair of leggins, in which his slender lower limbs were incased, scarcely reached to his ankles, plainly showing his thick, darned stockings and heavy pegged shoes. He was provided with a good rifle, a knife was thrust in a belt about his waist, and he carried a large wallet, and a small tea-kettle dangled by a strap at his left side.

CHAPTER II.

UNEXPECTED.

THE two boys were soon astraddle of the log, which was carried swiftly along by the current, the New Englander paddling with his hands to keep it straight.

"As I was saying," he remarked, "I came here for a live Injun, but, by gosh! the gold-darned creatur's wouldn't hear to it, at all. Instid of treating with me, they got eaout their scalping instruments directly, and would have skinned my head as neat as a whistle, hadn't I taken to my legs, which, fortunitley, air long and limber. I hid myself, and finally I came to this hole, where I've lain all night. The log we air straddling neaow I had feaound on the bank, and had rolled into the stream, as you saw, to have it handy in case I should want to use it. Neaow, do tell me if you think I can git an Injun—a raal wild one, I mean, for my show, in this country?"

"I reckon not. The coons is 'most too wild about hyar."

"Then I'm off again like a streak of goose-grease eaout of a frying-pan; but I'm beaound to git one somewhere, or my name ain't Hezekiah Helper."

As the lad spoke the log was carried round a 'bend' of the bank, when, to the surprise of both boys, they beheld half a dozen Apaches on a flat rock in the center of the stream, apparently waiting to head them off.

These Indians had no rifles, but their bows and arrows were ready, and the long shafts were pointed toward the occupants of the log.

"Heavens and airth!" exclaimed Hezekiah, "here's an unexpected 'to-do'!"

"Down, Hez! down!" said Ike—"flat on yer nose!"

"Mine projects too much," answered the youth.

Nevertheless he bent forward, and his companion did the same, just in time to escape the arrows, which grazed their heads and backs.

"Now fur a plumb-center," cried Big Horn Ike, raising his rifle, which he had previously unslung.

The crack of the weapon was followed by a grunt from one of the Indians, who reeled, and throwing up his hands, fell headlong into the stream.

Hez now took aim with his piece, and firing with precision, sent a second savage into the water.

Before the boys could reload, however, the remaining Indians pointed their arrows toward them and discharged them.

Whiz! came the deadly instruments, and they must have taken effect, had not Hez, thrusting out one of his long legs, pushed with his foot against a small rock, past which the log just then was being borne. This caused the floating piece of timber to sheer to one side, thus enabling its occupants to escape the arrows.

"Well done, Hez!" cried Ike, who by this time had reloaded.

He aimed his rifle, but the Indians, not caring to 'wait' for the bullet, made a spring for the protruding branch of a tree, by means of which they had gained the rock, and went hand over hand toward the bank. As the hunter pulled trigger just before they sprung, they escaped the shot, but Hez, who, after pushing the log, had quickly rammed a charge into his weapon, fired upon the party as they swung themselves along the branch. One of the Apaches was shot through the back. He clung to the branch, however, for some seconds, writhing and kicking, ere he let go his hold.

By this time the three others had reached the shore and, ensconced behind a ridge of earth, were prepared to avenge their slain companions.

"They've got the 'vantage of us neaow," said Hez.

"Ef we stay on the log it's all up with our goose—thar's a fact," said Ike, "but I'm not goin' to keep whar we are."

As he spoke, he threw the rope attached to the log so that a noose at the end caught round a rocky spur.

By this time the floating timber being on the left side of the rock the savages had quitted, was screened by it from their arrows.

Ike pulling on the rope, drew the log to the shore, and the boys, springing to land, darted among the trees of a small thicket there.

"Hyar we are, all right fur the present, and now our best plan will be to keep on for the mountain, yander," said Ike, pointing out the peaks of a range in the distance.

"Alleaow me to say that I guess you and I air pooty well mated," said the New Englander, shaking hands with his companion. "I'm glad we came together and I would raally like to have you for my show, as a specimen of one of eacour gallant buckskin hunters."

"I'm not fond of showin' myself off. I never war."

"Yes, but come, neaow, don't you think you could make more at it than you can at huntin'?"

"Money are well enough, but it would never tempt me to leave the free a'r of the plains and the mountains."

"Waal, then, you air a prodigy!" cried Hez, with a look of surprise.

The two kept on for some miles, and, finally, paused among the mountains to partake of dinner.

As soon as he had made a fire, Hez unsung his tea-kettle, put some water in it from a spring; then took half a handful of tea from a paper bag in his wallet, and dropped it into the kettle.

"I can't git along witheabout my tea," he remarked, "and what's more, I never would do witheabout it, except in some such case as that of the Boston tea-party that threw all the tea from the Englishers into the water."

Having prepared his tea, Hez took out a stale loaf of Boston brown bread from his wallet, and also a small tin dish, containing some baked beans.

He invited Ike to share these things with him.

"How did yer keep yer beans so well preserved?" inquired the hunter.

"They were canned. I opened the can only yesterday. There's nothing on this airth to equal baked beans!"

"Try that, and see how yer like it," said Ike, cutting a slice from his antelope steak.

"Sweet and juicy," answered Hez, as he swallowed a morsel, and rolled his eyes, "but beans is beans, and, deaown eacour way, they know heaow to cook 'em, tew."

Dinner finally being finished, the boys found a good position on a hill, with some fallen timber there, which would serve them for a sort of breastwork, in case of their being again attacked by the Indians.

"Waal, I was going to leave this part of the country," remarked Hez, "but I guess I'll stay with you for a few days, and git recruited up a little before I start. Meanwhile I hope the Apaches won't git my scalp."

"I reckon they'll not come this way, in a hurry."

"Why?"

"Because they don't car' to git too clus to the'r enemies, the Navajoes who are on t'other side of the mountains."

"S'posin', then, we put up a hut here, and make this place eacour huntin' quarters. I should like to bring home a buffalo-skin before I leave these diggings."

"Bufflers is skeers hyarabout, but they sometimes come to the plain yer see yander. Are you a good shot?"

"Air you? But of course you air; I can see it in your eye."

"I reckon thar's not many things kin 'scape 'Grunter' at a hundred yards."

"That's the name you give your rifle, I s'pose?"

"Yes, but I asked yer ef you war a good shot."

"Waal, neaow, do tell me where ought a buffler to be hit when you fire at one?"

"Through the flank, under the back-bone."

"I'll note that deaown in my head."

"Are you a good shot?"

"Abeabout middlin'. I've had some experience in eacour Vermeaount woods."

"I reckon you're one o' them chaps called 'Green Mountain Boys.'"

"Waal, of course, as I'm from Vermont I do belong to that air fraternity."

Ike shook him warmly by the hand.

"And I'm from the Big Horn country. Let us be pards."

"With all my heart, I do assure you and I guess we'll hitch together abeaout like two peas in one pod."

The boys proceeded to erect their hut. As it was only for temporary use, it was soon finished, being made of branches, grass and moss.

A hole was left in the top for the escape of smoke when a fire should be kindled, and was so arranged that it could be closed in wet weather.

Outside the little dwelling was encircled by a rampart of logs, piled nearly breast high.

CHAPTER III.

HEZ IN TROUBLE.

WHEN night came, the two friends took turns at standing watch, but no sign of an enemy was seen. In the morning, just after breakfast, a herd of buffaloes were visible on the plain, which extended to the southwest of the mountains.

"Thar yer are," said Ike. "Come, Hez."

"Will not the creatur's see us advancing?"

"No, we will hev to crouch in the grass, as we draw towards 'em. Thar's a wallow, hyar and thar, on the plain, and we kin fire from one on them places."

"What on airth is a wallow?"

"A sort of hollow in the ground."

Shouldering his rifle, Hez followed his companion to the plain.

When there, the two stooping, crept along, on hands and knees, toward the herd, whose loud bellowing reached their ears as they came on.

Finally they were near enough for a shot.

"Now's yer time!" said Ike, and crack! went his rifle, as he spoke.

A huge bull went down upon its side.

Hez fired nearly at the same moment, and hit the beast he aimed at, but not in the right spot, for the creature came plunging on.

Both boys rapidly reloaded.

In his eagerness to kill his game, which showed by its movements that it was severely wounded, Hez ran out of the wallow, toward the animal.

All at once the beast made a rush for him with lowered head, looking at him askance with its black, wicked eyes.

"No ye don't!" cried Hez, aiming for the brute's flank.

He fired, but the buffalo having just then tossed his head, escaped the shot. Hez jumped aside to reload his piece, but, ere he could ram home the cartridge, the animal charged upon him.

The Vermont boy, clubbing his piece, dealt him, between the eyes, a tremendous blow, which, however, appeared to have little effect upon the brute.

On it came, and, but for the lad's jumping back, the monster would have gored him. As it was, the horns caught in his suspenders, and, with these twisted about the appendages, Hez was lifted squirming from the ground and carried off on the animal's head, kicking his long legs in a vain effort to free himself.

"Hello! friend Ike, where on airth is the creatur' takin' me too? Heaow am I to git off its confeaounded horns, which air like a roll of baker's twist?" cried the boy, as he was borne on.

Ike, who had just shot another buffalo, quickly reloaded his piece. He realized the danger of his Yankee pard, whose breath would soon be shaken out of his body by the violent tossing of the buffalo's head, as the animal vainly strove to throw off the unwelcome incumbrance.

"Darn, my cucumbers!" cried Hez, "this is the most uncomfortable quarters I ever had. Quick, friend Ike, can't you do something to get me eaout of this fix?"

The young hunter had started after the beast, which was making straight toward the rest of the herd, scampering off in the distance. Unfortunately the long legs of the Vermonter hung over the vulnerable part of the buffalo, thus hindering Ike from firing, as his bullet would have been sure to hit his pard.

He shouted to him to try to shift his legs, but, by this time, Hez was too far off to hear him.

"Lord help the chap," muttered the youth, anxiously. "Thar's a gully, 'bout twenty feet deep, a mile ahead, and I'm afeared the buffler is too badly wounded to spring over it. Hey! thar go the rest on 'em, jumpin' across the gully!" he added, as the bellowing animals ahead were seen to make a leap.

"Jerushy and Jemima!" cried the imperiled

lad, as he still vainly strove to release himself from the horns, "can't you stop a minute, you gol-darned buffler, jist to let me git my breath?"

On went the beast, still speeding toward the gully, which Hez now could see, not more than five hundred feet off.

He endeavored to draw his knife, and finally succeeded.

"Neaow, then, I'll cut things short," he exclaimed, making a plunge with the blade at the animal's neck. But the tough hide resisted the point of the weapon, which bent upward like a piece of lead.

"Darn the knife!" said Hez. "The grocer chap I bought it of told me it was good steel, but it must have been made of some of the hoop-iron from one of his old molasses casks."

The speaker now tried to get at his suspenders, which were twisted about the horns, so as to cut them, but as he lay partly over on his back, and was unable to turn, he was unsuccessful.

Meanwhile Ike, far in the rear, still followed his imperiled friend.

"Thar goes the animile!" he cried, at last, "clus to the brink of that 'farnal gully!" And —yes, shore as I'm alive, thar's a band of Injuns —Navajoes, ef I'm not mistook, comin' up on the flank of t'other bufflers!"

In fact a party of savages numbering about fifty, now were seen darting on their fleet steeds like a whirlwind from a thicket to the left of the herd.

As Ike spoke, they bent their bows, and their arrows darkened the air, a few of the barbed shafts soon lodging in the bodies of some of the creatures.

"They'll see my pard, and then, even ef he 'scapes, arter falling into that gully, from being killed by the buffler tumbling on him, he'll hev a chance of heving his ha'r lifted."

Exerting all his strength and agility, he was within fifty yards of his friend when he saw the beast stagger, reel and then plunge into the deep hollow!

Hoping that, as yet, the Navajoes had not perceived the imperiled boy, Ike, crouching in the long grass, darted along with snake-like movements, keeping his gaze on the savage band.

In a few minutes he suspected that Hez and his perilous situation had been noted by the quick-eyed savages, for half a dozen of them now were speeding along toward the gully, their long lances glittering in the sun and the hair from their shields waving on the wind.

Ike kept on, and shortly reached the edge of the hollow, to behold the buffalo lying on its side there, struggling, kicking and bellowing, apparently too badly hurt to rise.

"By the 'tarnal! it's all up with Hez!" gasped the boy, seeing nothing of his friend. "The critter must have rolled on top of him!"

He slid down into the ravine and looked closely at the buffalo, but he still could see no sign of the Vermonter.

"Hez! Hez! Whar are yer?" he called.

"Heer I am, snug as a slapjack in a frying-pan!" was the response, seeming to come directly from the animal.

"And whar's that?" continued Ike much surprised.

"Waal it's heer—that's all I can tell ye!" was the response. "Heaow on airth I got heer, and heaow in the name of pumpkins, I'm to git out, air easier said than answered."

"Yer's not uncomfortable?"

"Waal, abeaout as much so as a b'iled turnip under a pertater-masher. Ther facts air that if the elephant should come deaown heer, on top of me, he'd mash me to a gooseberry!"

"I understand, now; yer've tumbled into a hole, and are under the buffler. Good gracious! the ground are cavin' some, and ef the critter should fall on you, as you say, it would be all up with yer cakes!"

"I calkelate it would."

"Whar yer are is the best place fur you, at present, as thar's Injuns comin' this way. Lie still, and don't say a word. Meanwhile, I'll kill the buffler, so as to purvent his breaking any more of the ground, and fallin' in on you."

"All right, but heaow can you kill the creatur' without shooting him?"

"Thar's a sartin spot on his head by which I kin settle him, in the condition he is now."

So saying, with the butt of his rifle, Ike dealt the animal two sounding blows, when the creature, stone dead, rolled over on its side.

The boy then crawled into a slight excavation, at one side of the gully, and pulled down over the opening some of the long, drooping tufts of grass, which would screen him from the gaze of any person without.

Soon after, he heard guttural voices, and saw the savages descend into the hollow.

They examined the dead buffalo, and a 'talk' was held, for they seemed surprised that the creature had been killed by its fall.

By their manner, Ike knew that they had not observed Hez, although they had seen the animal when it fell into the gully.

The Vermonter must have dropped from the creature's horns while it reeled and staggered on the edge of the hollow.

The hunter saw the savages finally draw their long knives.

"Gracious! they're goin' to cut up the animile, and ef they do, they'll be shore to spot Hez!" thought the boy.

Several of the party advanced straight toward the earth-cavity in which Ike was crouched, and were proceeding to pull at the long, drooping bunches of grass, which they would want for wiping their knives. As stated, the lad had drawn this grass down over the opening to conceal it, but in a few seconds, so much of it was torn away that the boy was now almost revealed to the Indians.

Holding his rifle ready, he was preparing to fight for his life, when an Indian came dashing up to the edge of the gully, and shouted to his comrades below.

Ike knew enough of the Navajo dialect to understand that the savage was announcing to the others that Apaches were in sight.

There was a grunt in response, and the whole party quitted the gully.

As the youth heard them riding off, he left his hiding-place.

"The varmints are gone!" he said to Hez, "which are mortil good fur us."

He had soon cut away enough of the buffalo to enable Hez to crawl up from the hole, when he explained about the arrival of the Indian messenger.

Then he crawled up to the edge of the gully, and took a survey, to see the Navajoes, now almost out of sight, in pursuit of their enemies, who were scarcely visible in the distance.

When he returned to the bottom of the gully, he found his friend trying to tie together his broken suspenders, which had snapped off, thus freeing him from the buffalo, just as the creature was about to fall into the hollow.

CHAPTER IV.

THE WILD-MAN MONSTER.

"Waal, if this is a specimen of buffler-hunting, I don't think I shall be in a hurry to try it again," said Hez. "Never in my life did I git sich a shaking up—not even when I went to Deacon Tewkesbury's school, where I used to be lifted by the hair and swung rearound and rearound, as if I was a mop."

"You did well fur a beginner," answered Ike. "Now I'll show you how to cut up and skin the animiles."

Before long the boys had conveyed the best part of the meat and the skins to their shelter, and in a few hours a good supper of venison had been prepared.

In the course of the day the two saw a deer, and started off in chase of it. The shades of night, however, closed round them while they were hunting for the animal, and they concluded to give up the search.

It was a moonlight night, and the bright beams streamed full into their habitation through the opening which served for a doorway.

Then they uttered a cry of surprise on perceiving that their skins were gone.

"Injuns have taken off eacour goods!" cried Hez.

"No," said Ike, as he pointed to the impression of a heel on the ground near the hut—"not Injuns, but one of our own color."

"Any man that would steal another man's skins must be meaner than a wooden natmeg," cried Hez.

"Worse nor a skunk," said Ike. "In the mornin' I'm arter the chap, whoever he war."

"And I'm with you," rejoined Hez. "I set my heart on one of them skins, and I hope we'll find the confeaounded cuss that stole 'em."

They both started at dawn, after a hasty breakfast, in search of the plunderer of their property.

Ike, with his eyes on the ground, saw the impression of feet, which were too faint to be noticed by his companion, and moved along with the celerity of a hound on the scent.

Finally, however, he was baffled by rocks, upon which, of course, no trace could have been left by the thief.

It was now, therefore, merely guess-work as to the direction taken by the person sought for.

Among the towering fragments of rock where they looked, the boys finally lost sight of each other.

Ike had gained the ledge projecting from the side of a crag, the summit of which was partly hidden by a mist, when he imagined he beheld in the latter the dim outline of a form.

As he looked toward it, this figure advanced to the edge of the crag, now being directly above him, at a distance of about twenty feet, affording him a tolerably distinct view of it.

He drew back with a cry of surprise, for never before had he seen so singular a being.

The figure was that of a sort of man-monster, whose whole form was covered with hair, like that of a bear, and whose face, very dark in hue, was unusually broad, with small ears and great eyes that seemed to bulge from his head. His nose was flat, with large nostrils, while his mouth like a wide, red line, extended almost from cheek to cheek.

"Hillo! who are you, and whar did yer come from?" cried Ike.

The strange creature's only response was a hoarse, guttural cry; then it turned as if to retreat.

"By the 'tarnal! I b'lieve you are the varmint that stole the skins!" cried the hunter, as he rapidly ascended the cliff.

A cry, as of defiance, broke from the wild man, and by the time his pursuer had scaled the cliff, he was some yards ahead of him.

"Come back, thar!" cried the boy, pointing his rifle toward him, "come back, or I'll put a bullet in yer!"

Again the man uttered his cry of defiance and Ike was about to pull trigger, when he felt some one grasp his arm.

Turning, he beheld the Vermonter, who had evidently come up on the left side of the cliff to reach his friend at this critical moment.

"By the everlasting!" cried Hez, "don't fire! don't hurt that beautiful creatur!"

"Why not? Ef he aren't the thief that stole our skins, I'm mou'ty mistook."

"Never mind eacour skins! I'd be willing to lose a cart-load for the sake of capturing sech a beauty."

"Beyooty! I don't think thar's any more beyooty 'bout him than thar is 'bout a hedgehog."

"You don't understand. What I mean is that he'd be a deaown-right beauty for my show—worth more'n his weight in gold!"

"You may be right thar."

"Besides, we can get eacour skins better by capturing him than by shooting him."

"Well, ef you want to git hold on him, I don't mind helpin' yer," said Ike, "for sech a critter is a nuisance anyhow. I've heerd of many a hunter disappearing 'mongst these hills, and I've always thought that Injuns war not the only varmints that made 'way with 'em. I now think this wild monster-man hev had somethin' to do with it."

"Waal, I don't know. I should guess him to be a harmless sort o' creatur' in spite of his beauty."

"Thar he goes, meanwhile, further and further from us. Ef we want to git him, we'd better make a start as soon as we kin."

"I'm with you there, as slick as a pint of molasses," said Hez. "Come on!"

The boys darted after the monster, but the latter had so much the start of them, and moved with such marvelous celerity that he soon disappeared among the rocks.

For hours they continued to search for him, but in vain.

Suddenly Ike, who had got separated from his companion, saw the wild man bounding along over a rock ahead. He started in pursuit, but the fugitive soon vanished in a cavern, at the foot of a rugged elevation. Cocking his rifle the youth ran into the cavern. It was quite dark there, so that he was obliged to feel his way, but he at last emerged through an opening at the other end. Then, for an instant, he again saw the monster, now on an elevation, ahead of him. When the boy reached the summit of the height, the strange being glided into the shrubbery on the bank of a stream below. Again his pursuer darted toward him, but when he reached the mass of bushes, the creature was gone. He heard a rustling, however, and saw him rushing up the side of a wooded hill, to be soon concealed by the thick undergrowth. Ike ascended the hill as far as he could, but when he had passed through the thicket, he beheld a rock, which, rising to a height of about fifteen feet, was too smooth to be climbed.

Suddenly, as he looked up he beheld, to his intense surprise, instead of the wild man he had

been pursuing, the figure of a young girl on the summit of the rock.

This girl was beautiful, and not more than fourteen years of age. She was a brunette, with bright, black eyes and long, dark hair, the latter falling in heavy masses from under a deerskin hat, in which was fixed a waving plume. Her attire consisted of a dark dress, fancifully trimmed with red, which, with its neat, white collar and a pink bow, was very becoming to her.

"Hallow! who are you?" called the young hunter, politely lifting his cap. "I didn't know thar war a white gal within forty mile of these diggin's!"

The person he addressed colored deeply, and seemed on the point of retreating without making any reply.

"Don't go!" pleaded Ike, "but, fur the Lord's sake! tell me ef yer's seen a monster—a sort o' wild man, come this way jest now. 'Fact is," he continued, "I don't onderstand it! I last saw him near hyar, and I don't see how he could hev gone any other way than up the rock on top of which you are, though how he could hev got up thar, beats me!"

"I have seen no wild man," the girl replied.

"But I tell yer thar's one around, and yer'd better put yerself under my purtection, fur I'm shore yer'd be afeared on him ef yer should see him. How kin I git up to yer? It's a mystery to me how yer got on top o' that rock, and—"

He paused, for the girl, suddenly retreating, vanished from his sight.

"I'll shin up thar, somehow," muttered Ike. "I feel sorry fur that gal; she must be purtected."

The height of the rock was about twenty feet. Ike, looking round him, saw a sapling which would answer his purpose. He cut it down with a small hatchet he had taken from his wallet, and placed it slantingly against the rock in a leaning position with the upper end fastened in a crevice.

He commenced to climb the support, and in a few minutes he gained the top of the height.

"Hallow! she's gone!" he cried, in astonishment.

He looked about him, but he saw no way by which she could have left the rock which, as stated, was too smooth on all sides to descend by climbing.

"Where air you, friend Ike! What on airth has become of you?" came the voice of Hez, at that moment, from the thicket below him.

The Vermonter soon appeared at the base of the rock, looking up at the hunter.

"Waal, waal, so heer you air! What's become of the keaouriosity?"

"Thar yer beat me! It's the most mysterious critter I ever heerd on. I chased it, and all at oncet, instead of that, who should I see but the pootiest white gal I ever sot eyes on standin' on this rock, though how she got up hyar are a mystery."

"Come, neaow, that don't go deaown! You don't mean to tell me that the creatur' turned itself into a white gal?"

"I didn't say so; but now you speak on it, it does look mou'ty like it."

"Jemimy!" ejaculated Hez. "Wouldn't sech a wonder draw creaowded houses! But of course that's eacout of the question."

CHAPTER V.

MARY MARCO.

THE Vermonter now clambered up to the side of his friend, who continued to speak about the white girl and her singular disappearance.

Both boys examined the rock closely, but they could see no place in which the girl could have hidden herself.

Below the rock, on the side opposite to that which they had climbed, a thick growth of bushes extended all the way down the hill-slope. At the base of the hill there was a small lake, in the center of which was a little island, covered with trees, vines and shrubbery.

"Waal," said Hez, at last, "we'll never git eacour monster, if we stay up heer. Let's be moving."

The sapling was pulled up and transferred to the other side, and by means of the support, the boys descended to the hill, below.

They continued their search without success. They caught not even a glimpse of the girl, or of the monster.

Darkness now settled around them. They had retraced their way to the hill by the lake. "No use of goin' way back to our hut," remarked Ike. "We'll sleep on this hill ef yer've no objection, and ef yer kin sleep on bare ground."

"Try me," said Hez, and without another word, he sprawled out on the grass, to sink at once into a profound slumber, his nose turned upward and loud snores issuing therefrom.

"Thar, he's off," muttered Ike, 'fore we could make any 'rangements 'bout a lookout."

The young hunter shouldered his rifle, and paced to and fro, on the watch.

All at once, as the moon rose, and he gazed toward the foot of the hill, he fancied he saw a dark form emerge from some bushes that fringed the shore of the lake.

He saw it distinctly enough to feel sure that it was the wild man he and Hez had been in search of.

He hurriedly glided down the hill toward the monster; at the same moment he heard a splash, and beheld the strange being in the water, as he waded toward the little island in the center of the lake.

"Come back, hyar, or I'll shoot yer," cried the young hunter, pointing his piece at the figure.

The same defiant cry he had previously heard was the wild man's only response, as he kept on.

"I b'lieve the varmint knows I wouldn't really fire at him," thought Ike.

Then, shouldering the weapon, he ran to the lake, and, springing into it, started in pursuit of the fugitive.

Before he was within ten feet of him, the monster reached the island and plunged into the shrubbery. His pursuer soon gained the shore of the isle, and, moving quickly through the undergrowth, he was surprised to see a small hut in a cleared space between the thick bushes.

He hurried forward, and, noticing an opening in the front of the little habitation, he looked through it. The light of the moon streamed into the hut, showing him, standing in the center of it, the form of the same beautiful girl he had previously seen on the night.

"Beg pardon," said the boy, "but I have just seen that man-monster I'm searching for, and thought he mou't hev come in hyar."

"I have seen nothing," the girl quietly answered, and she shrunk back, as if she felt a little afraid of the intruder.

"Bless yer, miss, don't be fright'ed. I wouldn't harm a ba'r of yer head. I want to purtect yer."

"I need no protection," she replied. "I assure you that I can protect myself."

"You are not an American girl?" said Ike, who had imagined he could detect this fact from the way she rolled the letter R, in speaking.

"My father is an American—my mother was a Mexican."

"Well, all I hev to say is, ef yer want a friend to help yer, don't fail to call on me. I'll look 'round the isle a bit fur that strange varmint I saw. He sart'inly came hyar, and the wonder ter me are that you are not afeard of the monster."

"I am not at all cowardly," was the response. "I don't think you will find any monster here," she added, with a slight smile.

"I differ from yer thar. He must be on this island."

So saying, the boy left the hut and commenced to beat the brush in his search. He found nothing, however—not even a trace of the strange being he was looking for.

He was moving on, when he suddenly felt a light hand on his arm.

"Don't go there, or you are lost!"

He turned, to see the late fair occupant of the hut.

"Hillo! what's the trouble, miss?" he inquired in surprise.

"A pit," she answered, "one more step would have caused you to fall into it. See!"

And parting the bushes just in front of him, she showed him a deep dark hole, which the shrubbery had concealed.

"By the 'tarnal! that war a narrer escape!" he cried. "How kin I thank yer fur yer kindness!"

"Not much kindness was required to save a human being from such a fate," she replied.

"Tell yer what!" said the boy, "I now b'lieve that varmint I'm arter must hev fallen into this hole!"

The girl shook her head.

"I don't think so. It's likely he knew the place too well for that."

"Then, what on yearth hev become on him? I must allow I'm sarcumvented!"

The girl smiled.

"By the Lord! ef I kin onderstand sech courage in a gal as yours!" cried Ike. "Any other young lady would be tremblin' in her shoes, with sech a critter about."

"I have courage, as I said. There is only one person I am afraid of, but I don't think he'll find me here, in this wilderness."

"And who mou't that be, pooty one? Tell me, and I'll wipe him out 'fore yer kin say snakes?"

"I want no quarrel on my account," was the reply.

"But yer 'pear to be all alone hyar. You should hev a champion of some kind, and ef yer'll give me the privilege, I'll stand up fur yer, and be yer friend."

The soft black eyes of the young beauty beamed upon the speaker and made him thrill all over.

His frank, honest countenance seemed to prepossess her in his favor.

"So it shall be, then," she said. "I accept you for my friend, for, as you say, I'm alone here now."

"Now?"

"Yes, I will tell you how I came to be here. My father, John Marco, had left our home in Mexico to search for precious stones, which he had heard were to be found among these hills.

A few months ago he wrote to my young brother, Jack, who is a year older than I am, to come and join him, as he had found a place here where he thought there were large quantities of rubies, sapphires and garnets. My mother being dead, I concluded to go with brother, sooner than to be left alone, exposed to—the persecutions of a certain wretch—a half-breed Mexican named Lorano, who, because I would not consent to be his wife, had threatened to punish me—to be revenged. He is a bad fellow, and has a terrible temper, for which reason I said nothing to my brother about the affair, lest he should meet him and fight with him, in which case I am sure Jack would have been killed, as Lorano is a trained athlete, who can throw a bull, and well understands the use of the knife and the pistol. I went away secretly at night with my brother, and I do not think that the half-breed has the slightest knowledge of my whereabouts. Well, when we arrived here we met our father, and he and Jack put up this hut and stocked it with a plenty of venison and other provisions. They would go out among the hills, and be gone all day, hunting for precious stones, and would come back here at night with what they had found. Things went on thus until about three days ago, when they did not return. I have hunted for them every day," she added, anxiously, "but so far I have not been able to discover any trace of them, and God only knows what has become of them! Sometimes I think they must have been captured by Indians, and at other times I fear they have fallen into some dark ravine and have been killed! The last time they went my brother said to me:

"Mary, if we don't come back until some hours later than usual, don't be alarmed."

"I kin promise you I'll hunt for them," said Ike. "From what yer brother said, thar's some hope that things is all right. He mou't hev come upon a find, somewhar, and not car' to leave it."

"It may be so, but I have misgivings about it."

"Yer don't think that man-monster I see'd, hev got anything to do with the'r disappearance?"

"Oh, no!"

She spoke so decidedly that Ike was surprised, for, in his own mind, he had a suspicion that the strange creature was, in some way, connected with the affair.

"I reckon my pard and I had better take up our quarters, hyar, on this island, so as to be near yer fur purtection."

"No—no!" cried Mary, hastily.

"Why? I reckon it's best fur us to be near, in case that monster-man is not lost, and should come to molest you."

"I am not afraid of the monster. I should be more afraid of—of—"

"Go on, miss."

"Well, then, I should fear your friend more than the monster!"

"Lord! What harm kin thar be in that chap? He's a good fellow, and I'm shore he wouldn't harm yer."

"Perhaps not, but he is a Yankee, is he not?"

"A true-grit Green Mountain boy."

"What I am afraid of is not his hurting me, but I dread his curiosity. There would be no end to his questions, and he would be watching me constantly!"

"I give in thar, miss, fur I'll own I think he would."

"You will say nothing to him about your having seen me here?"

"Ef you wish me not to."

"Thank you, I do wish it, and now you had better go back to him. You can come here, once in a while, if you like, to make sure that I am safe."

"Thank you—thar's a favor I'll never forget!"

A deep blush dyed the smooth, oval cheeks of the girl.

"I mean that—that of course we will have to meet, now and then, so that I can learn what success you have had in your search for my father and brother."

"And, now, thar's a mystery I would like to hev yer cl'ar up. How did yer git on that rock, which are onclombable, whar I fust saw yer?"

"There is an opening, in the base of the rock, hidden by the grass and bushes, and there is a passage leading to a crevice, in the top of the elevation."

"Thank yer, and good-by fur the present."

"Wait a moment," she said.

She went to a cave, among some rocks, whence she disengaged a small, wide skiff mostly made of twisted willow branches.

"You can cross the lake in that," she said, "and can then push the boat back to me."

The young hunter entered the little vessel, and crossed the water in a few minutes, after which he shoved the canoe vigorously back to the island. Mary Marco secured it, and returned it to its place; then she waved her hand to him in token of adieu and flashed to him a bright smile across the few yards of water that separated them. The handsome boy hunter could not easily forget that smile; he had never before seen a girl whom he liked so well as he did this fair inhabitant of the isle.

CHAPTER VI.

A STRUGGLE.

IKE kept watch about an hour longer, when he tried to arouse his friend. We say *tried*, because it was no easy matter to awaken the Vermonter. The more his companion shook him, the louder did he snore.

"Come!" yelled the hunter, in his ear. "It is your turn to watch. I'm mou'ty tired, and want a nap!"

A snore that almost blew the speaker off his feet was the only response.

Again Ike shouted, and this time the other boy, lifting first one leg and then the other began to beat the ground with his heels.

Then, all of a sudden, opening his eyes, he clutched his friend by the throat.

"No you don't!" he cried. "You don't have my scalp witheabout sich a struggle as will beat all Jerushy!"

"I'm not an Injun. Don't yer know yer pard?" laughed Ike.

"Oh, hello!" answered the Vermonter letting go his hold, "so you're the one that reatuted me eaout, be ye? I've been dreaming of Injuns and I sweaw I thought you were one of them gol-darned creatur's come to take my bair."

"Thunder! ef yer sleep like that yer ha'r could be taken 'thout much trouble."

"Waal, I guess it's a failing of mine. I always was a great sleeper. Anything up?"

"Not jest now. Keep a sharp eye 'bout yer, and ef yer see that monster man, jest tech me, and I'll be on my feet, 'fore yer kin say shucks."

"All right, friend Ike; if I git a squint of the strange creatur', you shall know it."

The young hunter was soon in a sound slumber.

"He's a good lookin' chap—neat as a keaw-cumber," muttered Hez, as he glanced toward the sleeper, whose handsome brown face and sturdy limbs were revealed by the moonlight. "He'd have all the gals and any number of old maids after him, if he should come deaown our way, up in Varneamount."

As he spoke, the boy pulled from his pocket a small looking-glass, and commenced to study his own face by the moonlight.

"I'm not so rearound and smooth abeabout the chops as he is," he muttered, "but I calklate I'll do."

He pocketed the glass, and commenced to pace to and fro, with his rifle over his shoulder. He was a good-natured boy, and he resolved to let Ike sleep until morning.

"I won't wake him, even if I see the wild man," he thought. "Heer's an arrangement which may enable me to mitten on to him."

As he spoke, he took from his wallet a small but strong rope, at one end of which was a slip-noose.

"I'm good at throwing a lasso, as I hev had experience that way with unruly keows which

I was set to watch when I was a little boy. Neaow, if I see that monster, darn me if I don't think I can catch him by throwing this over his head."

Hours had passed, and it was now nearly dawn, when Hez imagined he heard a stealthy footstep in the shrubbery on the hill.

He advanced cautiously, to see the dim figure of the wild man, darting away from him.

"Neaow, legs," commented Hez, looking down at his long limbs, "let's see what you're made of. Do your best or I'll peaound ye!"

Away he went, rapidly gaining on the wild man, who had darted up another hill and disappeared over its summit.

The next moment Hez was over the crest of the hill, and when half-way down, he concluded he was near enough to hurl the lasso. The noose caught over the head and shoulders of the monster, and with a sudden, violent jerk the boy brought him to the ground.

"Neaow I have you!" cried the Vermonter, holding on to the rope. "You can't git away from me, so you may as well keep quiet. Jerushy! if this ain't a prize, then there air none in creation!"

But as he spoke, the wild man, drawing a knife, severed the rope with a blow.

"Halloa! darn me, if he ain't got off after all; but he ain't goin' to escape me, if I know myself!"

Hez, bounding forward, overtook the fugitive ere he gained the bottom of the hill, and threw his arms about him.

"You beyootiful creatur," he cried, "just listen to reason, won't ye? I'll give you a dollar and tew shillings a week, besides your board, consisting of hasty pudding, pumpkin pie, and the loveliest molasses that ever came eadout of a bung-hole, if you'll jest consent to go with me and show yourself off at my show to the intelligent community of Peakville, Varmaeount, twenty-five cents admission, and five cents off for—"

The wild man made an effort to break from him, and both fell to the ground. Then the monster, disengaging himself, rolled with great celerity to the base of the hill, and disappeared in the jungle of a narrow gully there.

"Heavens and airth! The creatur' is as supple as an eel!" muttered Hez, as he darted after him. "The wonder to me, though, is that he did not try to use his knife on me."

He was soon dashing into the jungle, where all was darkness. He could hear a rustling ahead of him, though he could not see the fugitive, and he sprung in the direction of the noise.

He soon beheld a dim figure before him, and the next moment he had seized it.

"Come, neaow, better give yourself up. I don't want to hurt ye; I only want ye for my show!"

As he spoke, Hez felt his opponent seize him by the collar with an iron grasp, and saw the blade of a knife, dimly revealed, before his eyes.

"Got you now! Quick kill you!" came the hoarse, gurgling voice of his fierce adversary. "I do not want you here. You are a cursed Yankee!"

"Hulloa! 'tarnal gracious! So you air beaound to show fight, be ye? Waal, I can accommodate ye, though it does go against my bile tew do it, for I don't want to spile ye for my show."

So saying, Hez dealt him a kick in the stomach, which caused him to let go of his collar, while, at the same time, by a nimble twist of the body, he avoided the knife which had been aimed at his breast.

Wielding his rifle by the barrel, the next moment he dealt his opponent, on the wrist of the hand which held the knife, such a blow as caused the weapon to drop to the ground. Then, springing forward, he clasped the man in a bear-like hug.

"Come, let's be good friends," he said. "The proposal I made ye, 'specially abeaout the molasses, ought to have tickled your gizzard, and the—"

Ere he could finish, the other, by a sudden movement, broke from his grasp, and then catching him round the middle, he dexterously tripped him up, so that he fell on his back. An instant later Hez felt the knee of his powerful opponent upon his breast, saw a pair of fiery eyes gleaming upon him through the gloom, and felt the muzzle of a pistol against his forehead.

"Cursed Yankee! say now you will go away from here, or I will blow out your brains!" came the hoarse voice.

Brains air tew scarce nowadays to be treat-

ed in that fashion," said Hez. "I protest against it."

"Say if you will go away, or not!" cried the other.

"Waal, I rather calkulate that, under the circumstances, I'm entitled tew a little reflection," said Hez.

The sharp report of the pistol was heard, but Hez, who had made a side movement of the head as it was fired, felt the bullet only graze his temple.

He threw up his arms, dashing his clinched fists into the face of his adversary, partly stunning him, so that he was enabled to regain his feet.

He now swung his rifle round, trying to hit his enemy on the head with it, but the latter darted off, and was soon lost to view in the gloom.

Hez continued to search for him, but in vain; and finally he returned toward the spot where he had left his friend.

As he approached the place, the dim light of dawn began to dispel the darkness, when he gave utterance to a cry of dismay. Not five yards from Ike, who still lay asleep, stood a youth of about eighteen, aiming a carbine at the prostrate boy.

He wore a round cap, a short jacket, having many bright buttons, deer-skin leggings and a sash. This attire, together with his long, black hair, falling nearly to his shoulders, and the dusky hue of his cheek, which was turned toward Hez, convinced the latter that he was a Mexican or a half-breed.

For an instant the spectator stood motionless with dismay, but realizing that prompt action was necessary, if he would save the life of his pard, he brought his rifle quickly to his shoulder, and took aim at the half-breed.

Before he could fire, however, the shot of the other person must have sped on its mission of death, had not the carbine been thrown upward by the hand of a beautiful young girl, who sprung suddenly from the shrubbery behind the Mexican. The shot went whistling upward among the trees, and, awakened by the report, Ike sat up, rubbing his eyes.

CHAPTER VII. THE RAVINE.

"You balk me!" cried the Mexican youth, glaring at Mary Marco—for she it was who had interfered to save the sleeping boy; "but I will have his life yet, and as for you—"

He did not finish the sentence, but shaking his hand warningly at the girl, he darted off.

Just then Ike, who had risen to his feet, beheld Mary standing near him, and not far off his friend, Hez, who was so astonished at seeing the white maiden that he had neither spoken nor moved since the Mexican disappeared among the trees.

He had recognized the voice of the dusky youth as that of his antagonist of the jungle, and this too had surprised him.

"So, then," he thought, "it wasn't the wild man, after all, that I had that set-tew with, a few heaours ago! He must have gone on somewhere else, and, meanwhile I met that darned Mexican chap, who tackled me witheabout rhyme or reason."

Meanwhile Mary Marco, blushing, met the gaze of the handsome young hunter.

"You here?" cried the latter. "Was there not a shot fired?"

"Yes, and had you got your waking senses, sooner, you would have seen who fired it. He stood among those trees, on your right, and he has now darted off. It was the Mexican Lorano—he of whom I spoke to you, last night. He would have shot you, had not I been near enough to see him, and to knock up his carbine ere he pulled trigger."

"So then, you have saved my life. But why did he want to shoot me?"

"He hates all the Americans, but I think he must have been watching us, last night, and have heard our agreement to be friends."

"The mean varmint. You now see that you hev need of purtectors."

"I did not think the villain had tracked me to this place."

"Heer, neaow! what's all this? It seems tew me that there hev been fine goings on, witheabout my knowing anything abeaout it. Who is this lovely damsel, and where on airth did she come from?"

And, as Hez said this, he strode up to the spot occupied by the girl and his friend.

"Miss Marco, my pard, Hez," said Ike, introducing the two.

The young girl slightly inclined her head, but Hez extended his large, bony hand.

"So your name's Miss Marco—hey? It's a sort o' Mexican name, I calkulate. Air you from Mexico?"

"Yes, but she is a Mexican only by her mother's side," spoke up Ike.

"And why did you come to these parts? What air you after? When did you make the acquaintance of my friend?"

"She is looking for her father and brother. I met her last night and she told me so, then," said Ike, in order to save Mary the trouble of answering.

"And why didn't you tell me last night?" persevered Hez.

"You war asleep," answered Ike.

"Yes, but I waked, after that."

"I war too sleepy then to speak to you 'bout the thing."

"Waal, better late than never," said Hez. "I am really preacoud and happy to make your acquaintance, Miss Marco," he added, turning to the girl, "and, whenever you want a friend, jest you call on Hezekiah Helper, and you'll find one who will be ready to die for you, provided there's no other way eadout of the difficulty!"

"The first thing for us to do now is to hunt for the gal's father and brother," said Ike.

"Hasn't it occurred tew you that the wild man may have had something to do with their disappearance?" inquired Hez.

"I thought so," answered Ike, "but Mary thinks differently."

The Vermonter then went on to explain to his friend his encounter with the monster, a few hours previously.

"I'm sorry he got away from you," said the young hunter, "for he might hev known something 'bout the two persons we are to hunt for."

"That's so, though I don't think we could have got him to answer any questions."

"Will you go with us on the search?" inquired Ike of Mary.

"Yes, I will go," she said. "After my seeing that Lorano, and thus knowing that he has tracked me, I would not dare to remain too far from you."

"We'll fix the mean creatur' if he tries tew harm you," said Hez. "Don't you worry abeaout it at all. We'll keepeaour eyes abeaout us, for your sake."

The Vermonter spoke earnestly and frankly. Having asked his questions, he was not nearly so inquisitive and disagreeable as Mary had thought he would prove to be. She felt that in him as well as in Ike, she had a staunch friend.

Breakfast was soon ready. Hez, who had prepared tea in his teapot, prevailed on the girl to partake of some of the beverage.

She said it was very good, and she brightened up after drinking it.

Finally, their meal being finished, the three started. Ike found it very pleasant assisting his fair companion over difficult places, while Hez moving forward, busied himself beating down the brush where it would interfere with her progress. They continued the search until late in the afternoon, when they paused.

"There is the place where father and brother were last at work," said the girl, pointing out a range of curious-looking cliffs. In fact most of these rocks had a singular porous look, not unlike that of the sponge.

The three were soon moving along a ledge of the cliffs, now and then pausing to peer down into some deep ravine, whose bottom was hidden by darkness from their gaze. Ike and Hez would then call, together, but to hear no response except the hollow echo of their own voices.

"I am afraid they have fallen into some ravine, and have been dashed to pieces," said Mary, turning pale.

"No, no, don't give up to sech thoughts," cried Ike. "They were probably too shore-footed fur any calamity of that kind."

"Yes, but you can see that these rocks, near the edges, are very crumbly. In stooping over to get what they were after, the rock might have given way."

She seemed so pale and anxious that the hearts of both boys were touched by her distress.

"To settle matters, and show yer that you are worryin' fur nothing, I will go down into the ravine," said Ike.

"Oh, no!" cried Mary, in alarm. "It would be very perilous work!"

"I don't think so. Thar's places for both hand and foothold; to make shore, I'll tie a rope about me."

But the girl shcok like a leaf, and pleaded earnestly with Ike not to make the attempt.

Hez turned his head aside with a smile.

"If that handsome chap hasn't brought eabout the gal's affections already, then there's no pumpkin-pie in Varneabout!" he thought.

He approached the two and said:

"You're right abeaout it, gal! He's better fit for your protector than I be, for he's more of a hunter. I'm the one tew go."

"But it will be dangerous for you, too."

"Waal, ye-es, I calkelate it will, but I don't know as that has anything tew do with it."

He could not help smiling at the mild manner in which Mary had spoken to him about the peril he would incur, and the smile was repeated when, on his having prepared for the descent, no further opposition was made by the girl to his going.

"Lucky I'm not in love with her," he thought. "If I hadn't left my heart tew hum, in the keeping of Almira Tompkins, I should be all-fired jealous of this hunter chap."

A rope he had taken from his wallet, had been lengthened by being hitched to one produced by Ike. Then Hez had fastened one end his breast, under the arms, and had secured the other to a strong projection of rock.

"Neaow, then, all aboard for 'Squeedunk!'" said the Vermonter, as he proceeded on his way.

He found the side of the ravine easy to climb until he was about half-way down, when he was glad enough he had a rope fast to him, as, without the help he derived from this, he would have found it impossible to go further.

"Halloa, thar! How yer gittin' on?" shouted Ike.

"First rate, and abeaout tew nine-tenths of an eaounce!" came back from the depths. "Alleaow me to inform you that there's a smell of brimstun deaown this way."

A few minutes later, his voice was again heard.

"Heer I am at the bottom, and neaow for a light on the subject."

So saying, Hez took a solitary match from a case in his pocket, and lighted a small pine stick, pulled from his wallet, in which he carried several of these useful articles. The stick had a pitch knot on the end of it, and afforded him an excellent light.

He moved along the ravine, but as yet he saw nothing but pieces of rocks and a few stones.

"As I thought was the case, that poor gal has been alarmed abeaout nothing. However, I'll keep on as the ravine appears to be a long one, and make sure."

CHAPTER VIII.

THE MYSTERIOUS VOICES.

ABOVE the ravine, Ike, kneeling down peered into the hollow.

"Can you see him?" inquired his companion.

"I did see him, but I kin not see him now, as he hev passed round the angle of a rock. It's plain yer folks didn't meet the'r death down thar."

"But he hasn't examined the whole length of the ravine, yet."

"That's true, gal."

Twenty minutes passed by which time Ike could scarcely see the reflection of the light.

"Halloa! thar! whar are yer, now, Hez?" he shouted.

He fancied he heard a faint response, which was followed by the sharp report of the Vermonter's rifle, after which the light was suddenly extinguished, and all was darkness, below.

"Ho! thar! Hez! What's the matter?" called the young hunter.

There was no reply.

Again he shouted in vain.

"Thar's somethin' wrong, down thar!" said Ike.

"What do you think has happened? Oh! I am so glad you did not go!"

"I don't know what kin be the matter," answered the boy, uneasily. "That coon war rather car'less with his rifle, and p'raps he's shot himself with it by accident!"

"Oh! dear!" gasped Mary.

"I must go and see."

"No, no!" pleaded Mary, laying a hand on his arm. "You must not venture there."

"Would you hev me stay hyar, miss, and my pard in trouble? I could never forgive myself fur doin' that."

"Cannot I go with you, if you must go?"

"No, it's too far fur you to clomb."

Then looking about him, he espied a hollow near, in a porous rock.

"Thar's a good place fur you to stay in," he said. "I'll close up the entrance with a few rocks, which you can move, ef you should want

to come out 'fore I git back. No one will find you thar, and I'll not be gone long."

"You are sure you will not be long away?"

"Well, gal," answered Ike, laughing, "all I kin say is that I don't think I will."

"I am so sorry you have to go."

"Don't worry 'bout it. I'll be back soon, ef it's possible."

Mary crawled into the hollow, over which Ike then placed some porous fragments of rock, which would serve to screen her person.

Then, seizing the rope dangling into the ravine, the youth commenced to descend. He finally reached the bottom, along which he rapidly moved, lighted by a torch similar to the one Hez had used, and with which he always took care to be provided. He had proceeded many yards without seeing a sign of his friend, or obtaining any response to his shouts, when, all at once, the gleam of his torch fell upon the blazing eyeballs and gaunt form of a huge wolf which obstructed his path.

A sudden shudder passed through his frame. Was it possible that this fierce animal had attacked and killed his pard, who had fired at the creature, but had failed to hit it?

The wolf stood a moment as if to dispute the hunter's progress, growling and showing its teeth. Then it sprung toward him.

"You're a foolish critter, and yer must be mortil hungry to tackle an armed chap like me!"

As he spoke, he took aim at the head of the beast, and fired.

The bullet passed through the brute's skull, killing it almost instantly.

"Not much trouble to settle yer 'taters," said Ike, as he reloaded. "It's a wonder to me that Hez, who is a pooty good shot, should hev missed yer, ef he fired at you."

He moved on, now and then calling the name of his friend, but as yet receiving no reply.

Finally the light of his torch flashed into the dark, yawning mouth of a narrow cavern in the side of the ravine.

He entered it, and again called.

Was it mere fancy, or did he then hear a faint response, which seemed to come from a long distance, and was followed by another, as of several voices?

"Hez! whar are yer?" he shouted.

He heard the response a second time—a sort of smothered sound, as if proceeding from the very heart of the rock!

"Well now, if this don't beat me!" he muttered. "I've heerd of toads being shut up in solid rock, but I never heerd of human critters thar—leastwise, not sech as could speak, although thar hev been human bodies found petrified in sech places!"

Thinking he might find some opening—some narrow passage—leading up into the rugged cliff, he carefully explored the cavern, but without success.

He could discover no place large enough even for a muskrat to enter, although he traversed the cave and felt of the sides from one end to the other!

"Kin yer not speak loud enough so as to tell me how I can git to you?" he shouted.

Listening with his ear to the wall, he heard the voices answer so faintly as to seem like an indistinct murmur.

"Perhaps thar's some other way to git to the person or rather persons who speaks, one of which is probable my pard, Hez," he thought.

He left the cavern and kept on through the ravine, looking carefully on both sides of it as he proceeded. But he saw no hole or opening of any kind, and finally he emerged from the gulch, having traversed its whole length.

He then examined the cliffs on the outside, to find them mostly of the same porous nature as they were in other places, but containing no opening large enough to admit a human being.

"Well, now," he muttered. "I must allow that I'm sarcumvented! What kin hev become of poor Hez?"

He searched still longer, but he was unable to find the location of his friend, although, as before, when he placed his ear to the rock and shouted, he could still hear the indistinct voices which so puzzled him.

As he stood leaning thoughtfully on his rifle, vainly trying to think of some plan for discovering the exact whereabouts of the speakers, he was startled by a female shriek.

"It's Mary, shore's I'm born!" he muttered.

"The gal must hev come out of the hollow whar I put her and hev got into trouble! Unfortunately that's the way with most on her sect. I never knowed but a few that would stay whar thev wur put!"

He rushed into the ravine and as rapidly as

possible retraced his way to the place where he had left the dangling rope.

But to his dismay he now discovered that the rope lay at the bottom of the ravine, the strands plainly showing that the line had been severed above!

"Thar's foul play hyar!" he muttered. "An Injun or some one else, knowin' I war down hyar, has cut the rope. God only knows, now, what'll become of that poor gal, fur I kin not clomb up 'thout that rope!"

Hoping he might get sight of the girl, if she was being carried off a captive, by leaving the ravine, and getting round to the other side of the cliff, he hurried through the gulch.

As he moved on, his gaze was suddenly fixed upon a distant elevation which had a gradual slope, with a broad, smooth path. Up this path, he now beheld a horseman urging his steed, while, with one arm, he supported, across his saddle, the form of a girl, whom the hunter doubted not was Mary Marco. Evidently she had fainted, for her head lay back against the rider's shoulder, her long hair falling over his breast.

One glance was sufficient for Big Horn Ike to perceive that the horseman, attired in loose deerskin pants, with a red sash about his waist, was a Mexican, and he at once divined that he was Lorano—the person whom the girl had so much dreaded.

"The mean varmint must hev follered us, this mornin', and hev watched his chance," he muttered. "Onfortunatly he's too fur off fur me to reach him with my rifle."

Keeping himself screened by rocks which rose in a sort of ridge along the path he was pursuing, he hurried toward the hight. But, by the time he gained the base of it, Lorano had reached the summit, and, a moment later, he vanished from the hunter's sight.

The boy dashed up the ascent, and soon reached the top, to behold a spectacle that made him shudder. The horse bestrode by the half-breed had taken fright from some cause, and was bounding along at a terrific rate of speed, toward the edge of the precipice, which was about two hundred yards off, the summit of the hight forming a sort of plateau of that length.

"The Lord help the gal!" muttered Ike.

"Thar she is, held on the horse by that varmint; so when the critter plunges off the precipice, she'll be carried with it as well as that dratted villain!"

Lorano was making every effort to stop the maddened steed, but in vain. The animal paid not the slightest heed to his voice, and, in a minute, he and his companion must, it seemed, be dashed to death on rocks far below the brink of the hight.

"Thar's but one thing to be done, and that must be done, quick as white lightnin'," commented the hunter. "Even that may not save the gal, fur the hoss has got started, and God only knows ef even a bullet will stop him!"

As he spoke the boy quickly raised his rifle, to his shoulder, and, aiming for the steed pulled trigger.

The crack of the piece was followed by a wild neigh from the animal, which, stumbling forward a short distance, went down upon its knees. Ere it rolled over upon its side, Lorano sprung off with his senseless burden, and thus the two were saved from the frightful fate which had seemed inevitable.

CHAPTER IX.

IN THE CLIFF.

"CAN you see any opening, yet?"

"No. God help us, we are, as it were, entombed in the heart of the mountain."

The first speaker was Mary Marco's brother, Jack, a fine-looking boy of fifteen—the other was his father—a middle-aged man of dark complexion.

For three days these two beings had been inclosed in the cliff. During their search for precious stones, they had seen, on peering through a crevice, the reddish glitter of some beautiful garnets, and, eager to obtain the prize, they had crept through a narrow rift in the porous wall, just large enough to enable them to move through it. The opening shelved downward from a ledge above the edge of the ravine, through which as stated, the young hunter, Big Horn Ike, had passed.

Scarcely, however, had father and son entered the aperture, when the form of Lorano, the Mexican half-breed, rose from behind a rock, not far off, whence he had been watching the twain.

"You both forbade me your house, because Mary did not like me, and refused my suit! Ah!

well, I have wanted to be revenged on you ever since and now I have the chance!" he muttered.

Mr. Marco and his son found the garnets; then they fancied they perceived the glitter of rubies, far beyond. As they moved on, they saw multitudinous passages, branching off from the one they were following.

"What a strange mountain," said Mr. Marco, "it is like a bee-hive. The inside of the whole elevation appears to be honeycombed!"

"Yes," said Jack, "and from these honey-combed-like passages I hope we will make a rich haul!"

The glitter of what they believed were rubies became brighter as they approached it.

"Hey, now, father, that will make rich people of us!" cried Jack.

"Don't count your chickens before they are hatched," said Mr. Marco. "These may not prove to be precious stones, after all, but only particles of mica!"

"Don't you believe it. We have had good-luck so far, and it isn't going to leave us now! Those are rubies, and nothing else, if I know myself."

All at once he uttered a cry of surprise.

"Where are they, father?" he inquired. "They were just now right ahead of us, but they have vanished all of a sudden. Can you see them?"

"No, I cannot!" answered Mr. Marco, in a tone of disappointment. "It's provoking enough! They appeared to be almost within our clutches, and now they've gone!"

An exclamation from Jack followed this speech.

"See, father! sure as we're alive, there they are again, but further off than they were before. How curious! What can it mean?"

"It puzzles me," was the reply, "but if we keep on, we'll soon reach the place at any rate."

Creeping along on hands and knees—for the roof of the passage was too low to admit of their standing upright, the explorers were within two feet of the glittering objects, when they again vanished, to reappear soon after, many yards beyond!

"Well, if this doesn't beat the very mischief!" cried Jack. "How do you account for it, father?"

The latter sunk down to rest with a bitter groan.

"What's the matter?"

"Matter enough! I never had so great a disappointment in my life!"

"Why don't you keep on?"

"No use, Jack, what we thought were rubies is a sort of shining-beetle—an insect called the *Elatér noctilucus*, which in the gloom has a luster like that of jewels."

"Are you sure, father?"

"Why, yes. Of course rubies are not alive, and cannot move away."

"I know that, but I thought they might have been lying on an inclined rock, and have been blown to where we see them by the current of air which comes into this passage."

"No, no; that could not be."

"I'm not so sure of that," said Jack.

"Well, then, you can keep on after those 'flying rubies,' but I'm too tired to move further until I've had a good rest."

Jack crawled swiftly forward, and he was about to stretch out his hands to seize what he thought were precious stones, when the glittering articles receded from him, to alight on the edge of a rock further beyond.

"It is as father said," he muttered; "they are really insects."

He was soon joined by his parent, and the two continued their search for precious stones. To and fro they went, creeping first into one and then the other of the labyrinths of passages; but for several hours their search was vain.

At last they found, imbedded in a crumbly mass of sand granite, a beautiful sapphire of almost dazzling brilliancy.

Suddenly Jack pointed into a narrow passage on their right.

"See, father! there are two more stones of some kind. What are they?"

Mr. Marco, after a moment's survey, gave a cry of surprise.

"It cannot be they are emeralds. There are none of these, I believe, in this locality, and yet these look mightily like them."

"Hulloa! I thought I saw them move!" cried Jack.

"No, no! They are too large for the insect which we saw before."

The boy crept toward them, and stretched out his hand to seize them, when Mr. Marco, who had followed closely behind him, grasped him

by the collar to draw him back. But he did not do so in time, for a serpent suddenly darting up, coiled itself about the wrist of the lad's hand, and was about to fasten its fangs in his half-bared arm, when his father, who had drawn a long knife having a very keen edge, severed the neck from the body with one blow.

The lower part of the creature loosened from Jack's wrist, and fell wriggling at his feet.

"A poisonous serpent," said Mr. Marco.

"It's lucky I did not give it time to bite you."

"But where are those stones you thought looked like emeralds?"

"What! don't you understand? Did you not see them rise from the heap of crumbly sand rock, where they had been lying? They were the eyes of that serpent!"

"By golly! what a sell!" exclaimed Jack.

"The fact is I had to turn my head sideways, when I reached for what I thought were the precious stones, as they were in a kind of crevice, on my left, and so I didn't see the serpent spring up."

"You must be more careful, in future. Better have your knife handy, for there may be many poisonous reptiles lurking among the crumbly pieces of rock. I think, now it's most time we thought of returning. Mary will be anxious about us, if we are not back before dark."

"Which way are we to go to get out? I must own father, that I'm puzzled to tell."

"I think this is the passage," said Mr. Marco, pointing to one on the left.

They started, creeping along the narrow corridor, but when they had proceeded for half an hour, Mr. Marco paused.

"We are not going right," he said. "I'm afraid we have got still further into the cliff."

"Suppose we shouldn't be able to find our way out? We would be in a pretty fix!" said Jack, laughing.

"It would be no laughing matter," was the serious reply. "We would starve to death here."

"As to that, we have provisions enough in our wallets to last us for nearly a week, if we are careful."

"Yes, and after that, what would we do? Besides, we will want water, as well as food, and neither of us has more than a quart in his canteen."

"Oh, well, father, don't let us get into the doldrums, yet. Time enough for that when we have to."

They threaded passage after passage, but without success.

At last they were so exhausted that they were obliged to pause.

"Can you feel the current of air, Jack?" inquired Mr. Marco. "I must own that I cannot."

"No, I do not feel a breath of air. We had it when we first came in here, but it has stopped now."

"That is rather strange," said his parent, who had no suspicion of the horrible revenge which Lorano had planned against him and his son.

In fact, the Mexican half-breed had closed up with a heavy boulder, which he had broken off from a sloping ledge, the opening through which the two had crawled into the passage, and this was the cause of the stoppage of air circulation which the explorers had previously noticed.

For hours, after resting, they vainly continued their efforts to leave their uncomfortable quarters. Finally, worn out with their useless labors, they dropped to sleep.

CHAPTER X.

THE VERMONT'S ADVENTURE.

HEZ, as already stated, kept along the ravine, into which he had descended, holding his torch in one hand and his rifle in the other.

He had nearly reached the terminus of the passage, when he beheld a fierce-looking wolf advancing toward him.

He fired, but without hitting the animal. The creature, however, turning, scampered off.

"Jerushy!" muttered Hez. "What a big fellow he is! I calculate I'll fetch him with another shot, if the creatur' only waits long enough," he added, as he proceeded to reload.

By the time he had rammed in his charge, the wolf was out of sight among some thick masses of shrubbery which grew along the base of the mountain.

Hez searched for him in vain. Finally, he found in the cliff a small opening, just large enough for him to squeeze through.

"The creatur' has gone in there, I guess. I'll

jest creep in and take a look, for it would be 'some pumpkins' for me tew be able to tell my friends about, when I go back, that I had shot a wolf."

He crawled through the hole, to find himself in a sort of corridor, or passage, having an upward slant.

He kept along, but he could see nothing of the animal he was in search of. Meanwhile he looked around him in surprise, on noticing the multitude of little corridors branching off in all directions from the one he occupied.

"If this meamount ain't a sort o' petrified beehive, then there's no pumpkin where I come from," he muttered. "Good gracious! I must go and tell my friends of this discovery! A reg'lar honeycomb it seems tew be!"

He crept back toward the opening through which he had come, to find it closed!

"Halloa! what on airth does this mean? Some one must have stopped up the hole, and who could have done it?"

He reflected a moment!

"I'll bet it was that infarnal monster man that did the bizness," he muttered. "The critter must have been spying on me all along!"

He pushed at the rock over the opening, but found that he could not move it.

"Hope tew gracious there's some way for me to git eaout!" he commented. "Guess I'll go and look for some other opening."

His experience was like that of Marco and his son. He became inextricably entangled among the rocky labyrinths, so that he could not find his way to the passage he had first entered.

All at once he fancied he heard a faint voice in the distance. He shouted a response, and it was this that Ike Ward had first heard when he called.

"The voice is tew far off for me to heer it plain," muttered the Vermonter; "but if it's as I guess it is—that of my friend Ike, I'll soon be helped eaout of this difficulty."

The call was repeated several times, each time Hez responded, but, as already shown, the young hunter could find no way to proceed in the direction of his voice.

Finally, after Ike went away, and Hez could no longer hear him, he felt his heart sink within him.

"Waal, neaow," he commented, dolefully, "there'll be no show in Peakville if I'm to be kept shut up in this darned honeycomb net. There air no sech places in Varmeaout and I'm glad of it, tew! I s'pose though I must make the best of it."

Accordingly he stretched himself out full length, and, in his nasal voice, which rung loudly and clearly through the hollow labyrinths of rock, he commenced to sing "Yankee Doodle."

Suddenly he stopped as a most unearthly scream fell upon his ear. The sound echoed and re-echoed through the narrow corridors, as it was repeated again and again.

"Heavens and airth! What can that be?" muttered Hez. "I never heard sech a yell as that before!"

The noise seemed to draw nearer every moment, and the boy, cocking his rifle, got upon his knees, ready to make use of his weapon, if necessary. At length, in a narrow passage on his right, he beheld, by the glare of his torch, which he had placed in a niche near him, the gleam of two round, fierce eyeballs, and, as the creature drew nearer, he distinguished its form, which certainly was the strangest he had ever seen.

The eyeballs were in a round head, which appeared to be without a neck attached to a hideous mass of crumbly, porous rock, beneath which short legs and sharp claws were visible.

In fact the body, back of the head, seemed of the same porous material as the interior of the mountain, or, in other words the form of the animal was like a large, ugly-looking sponge, having head, claws and a tail!

"Neaow, then!" cried Hez. "What a wonder! What a strange creatur'. I guess it would make the folks stare some, tew hum', if I could only capture and bring that animal alive to Varmeaout for my show. I'm gol-darned if I don't try tew do so, at any rate!"

He pulled from his wallet the rope with a noose on the end of it, and dexterously hurled it at the singular apparition. It caught about the creature's rock-like body, but, before the Vermonter could pull the line taut, the monster sprung toward him!

"Goodness gracious! Git eaout, will ye! Git eaout, won't ye!" cried Hez, as he endeavored to pluck the creature away from his clothing, in which it had fastened teeth and claws.

His efforts, however, were in vain, and feel-

ing the fangs of his adversary in his flesh, the boy had recourse to his knife.

"Darn ye, you're a beyooty, and I don't want to hurt you, but I'm not going tew stand any biting or scratching, so I'll jest put this in your mouth, tew see if it won't teach you better manners."

As he spoke, he thrust his knife a little way between the teeth of the animal, but the latter, with a loud snarl, wrenched the weapon from his grasp and threw it to one side.

"Halloa! things air looking serious," cried Hez. "Guess I'll have tew put a bullet in you, after all!"

He drew a pistol from his pocket, and placing the muzzle at the head of the beast, pulled trigger. But the weapon did not go off, and Hez, therefore, commenced to beat his antagonist about the head with it. The furious beast, however, fastened its fangs upon his collar, and in another moment, its teeth would sink into his throat.

Hez seized it by the tail with both hands, vainly striving to jerk it away. The teeth and fore claws already touched his flesh, when there was a deafening roar, and the monster letting go its hold, fell to the floor of the corridor, with a bullet in its head!

"Waal, neaow, heer's a tew-do!" cried the Vermonter. "What on airth does it mean?"

Owing to the smoke of the rifle which had been discharged, he could not at first see his preserver.

The latter, however, now crept near enough to meet the gaze of the boy, when the latter beheld a youth about the same age as himself.

"What sort of an animal is that?" he inquired looking down at the creature he had shot.

"Halloa!" cried Hez, "who air you? Heaow came you in this darned hole?"

"My name is Jack Marco," was the reply. "As to my being here, I suppose the same errand brought me here as took you to the same place. The trouble now is that my father and I cannot get out. We have been here for three days."

"Three days? And where is your father? Oh, I see him," added Hez, now noticing Mr. Marco, close behind his son. "Waal I'm much obliged to you for saving my life, and I'm glad tew make your acquaintance. Have you got enough tew eat?"

"We have provision enough to last us a few days," was the reply.

"I was going tew say that if you hadn't, I have plenty in my wallet. Neow, then, as to this creatur'," he added, looking down at the dead brute. "I'm as much puzzled abeaout him as you air. He has the head of a cat, and the claws, te v, I guess."

Mr. Marco turned the body over.

"It is nothing more than a small wild-cat, which has got in here, and unable to obtain anything to eat, was nearly starved, which accounts for its attacking you. The creature, like ourselves, has been unable to find its way out. As to this stuff about its form," added the speaker, touching the rock in which it was partly incased, "this is merely some of the porous stone of which there is so much here. The cat must have got squeezed into a hole, and in its efforts to get out it dragged the rock with it."

As he spoke, Marco took a small hatchet from his belt, and was about to knock away the mass adhering to the body, when Hez seized his arm.

"No, no, don't!" he cried. "I'll take that creatur' home with me, jest as it is, and darn me if I don't exhibit it in my show as a half-petrified wild-cat. That will turn me eaout an honest penny or tew!"

He went on to explain about his intended show, and Mr. Marco then said he was welcome to the cat as it was if he wanted it.

"I'm afraid your show is not likely to come off," said Jack. "Do you know of any way to leave these quarters?"

"No, I don't; but if we could only find eaour way to the hole by which I entered, and which I guess was afterward blocked up by that wild man that's cutting up abeaout these parts, I think you might knock a passage through with your hatchet. By the way, your darter is very anxious abeaout you, and it was while looking for you that I got into this confounded place."

Hez went on to explain about his and Ike's meeting with May Marco, etc.

"We must try to get out," said Jack. "We will look for the opening by which you entered, for, strange to say, we found the one by which we came in also blocked up, and I now think I know who did it. I believe it was that villain Lorano, as you say you saw him."

"Good gracious! And perhaps it was the same rascal that blocked up the opening through which I passed."

"I have no doubt of it," said Jack. "Father and I could make no impression with our hatchet on the rock that was over the entrance, but perhaps we will be able to on this other one."

"I hope tew Jerushy you can. We might, as there air three of us, be able to push the rock away. Let's try and find it," added Hez.

Having fastened a piece of rope to the wild-cat, he slung it across his back, after which he and his companions commenced a search for the opening by which he had entered. They found it at last, and endeavored, but in vain, to push the rock away. Then they went to work, hacking at it with the hatchet, each taking his turn at this task.

"No use; it is a solid piece of rock, like the other one," said Mr. Marco, in despair.

"It is like iron," rejoined Hez; "and we'd starve tew death before we could force a passage through it."

"We had better spend our time looking for some place by which we can get out," remarked Jack.

CHAPTER XI.

MARY'S PERIL.

AFTER Lorano sprung with his senseless burden from the horse which Big Horn Ike had shot, and had thus prevented from plunging over the edge of the precipice, he turned to see who had been the means of saving him.

On beholding the young hunter, he frowned darkly, and ere Ike could reload his piece, he deposited the unconscious girl on the rock, and unslinging his carbine, took aim at the boy.

"Your time has come!" he cried. "You shall not live to plot against me!"

As he spoke he fired, but Ike, who, the moment he pulled trigger, had crouched behind a ledge of rock near him, escaped the bullet.

He had now loaded his own piece, and the weapon was at his shoulder, when Lorano, picking up the senseless girl, held her in front of him.

"Fire, if you wish," he cried, "and shoot the person I hold!"

"Rascally varmint, bring the gal hyar!" cried the hunter.

"No, thank you," answered Lorano. "I had trouble enough to get her, and I shall not release her in a hurry, you can be sure."

"I won't be balked by sech a varmint!" cried Ike, advancing swiftly.

Smiling scornfully, the half-breed, still holding the senseless form, receded with his face to the hunter.

When within a foot of the edge of the precipice the villain paused.

"Get back!" he cried to Big Horn. "If you advance three steps further, I will throw her over the cliff!"

"You varmint! mean as you are, yer'd not dare to do that!" said Ike, as he paused.

"Try me and see! Sooner than have her fall into your hands again, I would cut her into a thousand pieces!"

As he spoke, Lorano held the girl in such a position that, in an instant, he could fling her over the brink of the elevation.

"How kin I sarcumvent the raskil?" thought Ike. "He sartiutly has the best of me now."

He racked his brain for some minutes, then said to the Mexican:

"Well, I'll leave yer fur the present, as I don't want to see the gal come to harm."

And turning, he walked rapidly away.

"She'll soon come to," he thought, "and then she kin use her own wits."

Lorano did not release the girl until he saw the form of the hunter disappear behind the brow of the elevation.

At nearly the same moment, Mary came to and opened her eyes.

On seeing Lorano, she uttered a cry of surprise and alarm.

"Where are my friends?" she said.

"You may learn in time. Now I want you to go with me."

"With you? Where?"

Lorano looked from the summit of the height upon the ground, a hundred feet below. He made a quick calculation, and concluded that he and the girl could clamber to the base of the elevation ere Ike could reach the same place, as his way would be impeded by rocks and gullies in passing round to this side.

The height was not difficult to descend, as there were plenty of ledges, roots and vines projecting from the rocky wall. Even should

Ike go the other way, he could not reach the two ere they gained the base of the elevation.

"Come," said the half-breed, seizing the girl's arm.

She staggered to her feet.

"I will not go with you," she said.

Lorano pointed at her head his carbine, which he had reloaded.

"Come, or I will put a bullet through you!" he cried.

Mary trembled and turned pale.

"Where do you want me to go?" she inquired.

"To descend this height."

"I am afraid. I would get dizzy and fall!"

"Nonsense. You forget that Lorano knows what a skillful climber you are. How often have I seen you climbing worse places than this, in Mexico! Come, you go ahead of me!" he added.

Mary at once complied.

She descended with the rapidity of a deer, hoping in this way, to arrive at the base long before her persecutor, and thus find a chance to escape from him.

But Lorano, evidently aware of her intention, quickened his movements, so that he reached the ground almost simultaneously with the girl.

"Now, then, go on," he said, unslinging his carbine, which he had reloaded. "Keep straight on."

"Where would you take me to?" inquired Mary.

"You will know before long. Walk fast, or I will shoot you through the head!" added the brute, significantly tapping his carbine.

Mary quickened her pace, for she was afraid of this youth, whose fierce aspect indicated that he meant what he said. She knew that, his mother having been an Indian of the Apache tribe, he had inherited from her the fierce, revengeful nature of her people.

They had proceeded about a mile when they came to a dark gorge, between two cliffs. Mary hesitated at the entrance, but her follower bade her keep on. She entered the gorge, but soon paused on the brink of a deep pit, that hindered her further progress.

"Now, once for all!" cried Lorano, in a deep, husky voice, "I ask you if you still refuse to be my wife?"

"Yes," she answered, firmly.

"Then down you go into that pit."

"It is a sulphur-pit!" cried Mary, aghast. "I will die there."

She had noticed the odor of sulphur which came up occasionally from the opening.

"You will not be left there long enough for that."

"What do you mean?"

"I am going to surrender you to the Indians."

"The Indians?"

"Yes, to the young Apache chief, Talena, who has seen you and who wants to make you his squaw!"

"I will die sooner than submit to such an outrage."

"It is not so easy to kill one's self without the means to do it. Yes, as you refuse to be mine, you shall be the slave-wife of an Indian. Thus I will have my revenge."

"Revenge for what? Consider that I cannot help not loving you. Would you have a girl marry you when she can give you no affection with her hand?"

"Bosh! that is the way you all talk. Love would come after marriage. One thing is certain, I can never forgive a girl for refusing me. I am used to having my way in all things."

"You are foolishly unreasonable."

"Am I? Well I will teach you what it is to reject a man like Lorano. And that is not all. After tracking you for many long miles, I find you billing and cooing on an island with a handsome boy hunter."

As he said this, his eyes shone like balls of fire.

"You are mistaken," murmured the girl, while a glow of soft color dyed her cheeks.

"That boy is a friend who agreed to help me look for my father and brother."

"You will never see them again. As I told you, they are both dead!—were buried alive among rocks! Have you forgotten that it was my telling you this, when I saw you on the cliff, which caused you to faint away?"

"Oh! I remember now," she gasped, "you did tell me that. Are you sure they are dead?"

"There can be no doubt of it. Now down you go into the pit."

As he spoke he took from his wallet a rope which he fastened so that it would dangle into the hole to a rocky projection on the edge of the aperture.

As the girl hesitated the half-breed aimed his weapon at her head.

"Fire!" she cried, suddenly facing him. "Better to die than suffer the fate you have prepared for me!"

Lorano did not fire. He placed his weapon on the ground, seized Mary by the arm with one hand, and with the other pulled up the end of the rope from the pit.

Then he fastened it about her waist, and, in spite of her struggles, pushed her into the opening, meanwhile holding to the rope.

The next moment she found herself being lowered into the cavity.

The sides were too smooth for her to prevent her downward course. At the distance of twelve feet below the top she touched bottom. Then the rope, cut from above by the half-breed, dropped down after her.

The vapor in the pit made her dizzy, but it was not strong enough to suffocate her to death, although it choked her utterance, so that, if she should try to cry out, she could not be heard by any person standing near the aperture.

Lorano now hurried off, but he had not proceeded more than three miles when he found himself among a party of the warlike Apaches, who were seated in a rocky valley, apparently waiting for him.

A young chief came forward. He was a hideous-looking fellow, with a pock-marked face, and eyes that glittered like those of an asp.

"Has Lorano done his work? Speak, for ever since Talena caught sight of the white Mexican flower, near these hills, he has been eager to have her for his squaw."

"You might have had her without any of my assistance," answered Lorano. "You and your warriors could have easily captured her, as I wanted you to do."

"Talena would have done so but for the monster wild-man that haunts the mountains."

"So you told me before; but why you should fear him I cannot understand."

"He has warned us away!"

"Why did you not shoot him, then, with arrow or rifle?"

"Our medicine-man has told us that we should not harm him—that we should keep away from him, for, besides being a monster, he is mad, and has the power to bring misfortune on the tribe."

"Mere superstition."

"It is not so. The great medicine knows what he is talking about."

"Well, have it so," said Lorano, who knew the uselessness of combating the prejudices of the Indians. "Where are the precious stones you were to give me for bringing to you the 'Mexican Flower,' as you call her?"

"My brother has not brought her yet."

"I can take you to her in less than an hour. I have put her in a place from which she cannot escape."

"Why did not my brother bring her here? It would have been better."

"I had reason to believe that a certain white hunter was on my track, and thought it best to make sure of putting the girl where he could not get possession of her, even should he attack and succeed in overpowering me. Give me the stones, and I will take you to the place in which I have left her. If we see the white hunter, you can kill and scalp him."

"Ugh! good!" cried the young chief, his fierce eyes gleaming with savage joy.

From his belt he pulled a skin pouch, which he placed in Lorano's hands.

The half-breed looking in the bag, beheld about a dozen glittering stones, most of which were garnets, the rest being sapphires of a beautiful luster. He pocketed the treasures, and then said:

"Come, follow me, and I will take you to the Mexican Flower."

"My brother will be with us," said Talena. "That is good, for, if we do not find the girl, we will take back the shining stones we have given him!"

Followed by the Indians, Lorano led the way toward the sulphur-pit.

CHAPTER XII.

IKE'S STRATAGEM.

WHEN Big Horn Ike passed over the brow of the hill, after leaving Lorano, he crouched in a position, which would enable him to watch the movements of the half-breed through a crevice in a rock that projected above the edge of the elevation.

All at once, however, a fog had obscured the persons upon whom his gaze had been fixed.

He could hear their voices, though he could

not distinguish what was said, and it now occurred to him that he might contrive to steal toward them unobserved. He hurried along, but the cessation of the voices soon betokened that the two had left the spot. He finally was near enough to know that they were descending the height, and he therefore resolved to go round to the other side of it, to head them off.

"No use of follerin' them down the precipice," he muttered. "That half-breed would see me and would shoot the gal out of spite."

Rapidly making his way to the base of the ascent by taking the same direction in which he had come up, he hastened toward the other side of it.

There were many difficult rocks in his way, so that when he reached the foot of the cliff, he could not see the persons whom he was seeking. He hurried on and had not proceeded far when a small ribbon, which had dropped from Mary's hair, showed him that he was on the right track.

"Good Lord!" he muttered, "night is near, and what a pity ef I should not find the poor gal after all! That varmint is bad enough to shut her up in some secret cave or hollow."

Moving on, he finally reached the gully, in which was the sulphur-pit, on the edge of which he paused for a moment, preparing to spring over it.

Just then, however, chancing to look down, he beheld a hair-pin lying near the edge of the opening.

"Halloa!" he exclaimed, "this must hev dropped from the gal's head. By the Lord! it can't be possible that mean weasel throwed her down into this hole!"

He got upon his knees and tried to peer through the gloom of the cavity, but he was unable to see to the bottom.

Suddenly he fancied he heard a sort of gasping noise below him.

"By the 'arnall! I b'lieve the gal is down there!" he muttered.

Again he heard that gasping noise, followed by a sound as if some person was trying to speak.

"Hey! any one down thar?" he called.

A faint, half-choked response then came up from the bottom of the pit.

"She, or some one else, is thar!" muttered Ike.

The slender coil of rope, which, with other useful articles, he carried in his wallet, soon was in his hands. He fastened one end to the rocky projection on the edge of the aperture, and descended the dangling line.

"Who is that?" was faintly borne to his ears, when he had nearly reached the bottom.

"It's me, Ike Ward!" he answered, and the next moment he found himself confronting Mary Marco, who leaned against the side of the chasm, almost overpowered by the sulphur-tainted atmosphere.

"Thank God! I've found you at last!" cried the young hunter. "Who put you down hyar? But I needn't ask, fur of course it war that mean varmint Lorano."

"Yes," murmured the girl. "Oh! I am so glad you have come. Lorano has gone to bring Indians here to capture me."

"The cussed viper! Ef I meet him ag'in he'll suffer fur this. But how did yer fall into his hands? Did yer come out of the hollow whar I left yer arter I descended into the gully?"

"I did, for I was anxious about you. Then Lorano came all at once, from behind a rock, and told me my father and brother were both dead—had been buried alive among the rocks, by which I suppose he meant that they had been crushed by falling into some chasm. The dreadful news came upon me so suddenly that I fainted."

"I don't believe the varmint spoke the truth. He said it to make yer feel miserable."

"Then you believe my father and brother are alive!"

"Yes, I do. Ef I'm not mistook I heerd one or both on 'em shout to me."

"You did? Oh! Ike, where was this?"

"It war down in the gully, whar I clombed by the rope. The voices seemed to come from the very heart of a cliff, and I feel most shore them yer's lookin' fur is thar."

"I am so glad to hear this; but—"

She could say no more, for the foul vapor of the pit almost suffocated her.

"Come, thar's no time to lose, I must get yer out of hyar, soon as I kin."

So saying, Ike was about to fasten the lower end of the line about the waist of the girl, when he heard voices above him.

"Them cussed Injuns hev come," he whispered. "This is onfortunit; but don't be skeer-

ed. I've been in worse places nor this, in the course of my expe'ence."

"Here's the place," came the voice of Lorano, above. Then, noticing the line which Ike had fastened to the projection, he cried:

"Some one is down there! I believe it is the hunter I spoke to you about."

"Ugh!" answered Talena. "If the white hunter is there, we will have his scalp."

"You will have to go down there for it, unless you are afraid."

"Talena is brave, but he does not want to give his enemy the advantage. Before he could reach the bottom a bullet would be fired through his body."

"That's so. One brave at least, will have to die before you and your men can get the hunter's scalp."

The savages were puzzled as to how they were to kill Ike and get possession of the girl. A 'talk' was held, but no plan could be thought of.

"There is no help for it," said Talena, at last; "four or five of my braves will have to go, and one or two of them will probably never be brought up alive! Who will go?"

In an instant four Indians stepped forth.

"Good!" said Talena. "Have your tomahawks ready!"

With their tomahawks between their teeth, the four savages commenced to descend the line, their shields of buffalo-hide fastened to their bodies, so as to protect them as much as possible.

Ike held his rifle ready. Waiting until the foremost Indian was near enough for him to distinguish his form, he took aim and fired.

The bullet passed through the body of the savage, and he fell dead at the feet of the hunter.

The latter rapidly reloaded.

"Back, you varmints! back! I hev a revolver hyar, and ef yer don't go, I'll shoot every one on yer, which, bad as yer are, I'd rather not do, ef I could help it."

He had, in reality, no pistol of any kind, for he had lost one he possessed some weeks before, while swimming a stream with a rapid current. The savages, however, believed that he spoke the truth, and not caring to uselessly sacrifice their lives, they ascended the rope.

Talena found no fault with them for doing so, and again the Indians endeavored to think of some plan for overcoming their enemy.

"The best thing we can do," said Lorano, "is to pretend that we have left the place, and hide ourselves between the fragments of rocks near here. No human being can stay long in that pit and live. The white hunter will have to come up for fresh air, and then we can shoot him."

This plan was approved of, and leaving the opening, the party concealed themselves among the rocks.

"I know what they're up to," muttered Ike; "and it does look as ef I'm shore to be sarcumvented."

He tried to think of some way for balking his enemies. The shades of night were gathering, and would assist him in escaping, if he should leave the pit, but he would have to stop near the opening long enough to haul up Mary Marco, and of course this delay would insure his capture.

At last he thought of a plan—the only one under the circumstances which he could adopt. Fastening the end of the rope about the waist of the girl, he whispered in her ear:

"I am going to ventur' out. The varmints will be arter me soon as I leave the pit, but ef I dodge about 'mongst the rocks of the gully, I reckon I kin git 'em on the wrong trail. Then I'll come back and haul you up."

In the gloom he saw Mary shake her head, as if to imply that his plan would be sure to fail.

"Don't yer worry. If I don't succeed, then I'm mou'ty mistaken," he said.

Without another word he ascended to the mouth of the pit, knowing that the savages would not expect him to come up so soon after they had left it. He sprung through the opening, when, as he had expected, the whole party, headed by Lorano, darted in pursuit of him.

The hunter made for the further end of the gully, with his savage pursuers yelling behind him and sending arrows after him.

Fortunately the gloom was so dark here that they could barely see his form, so that not one of the shafts took effect.

Ike ran on, and, finally emerging from the gorge, he crept into a hollow which he had previously noticed and which was half screened by shrubbery.

The savages thinking he had kept on, and

darted among a mass of rocks not far from the spot where he was secreted, did not slacken their pace, and were soon lost to view among the rugged masses.

This was the favorable moment for which the youth had waited. He emerged from the hollow, and, in a few seconds had returned to the mouth of the sulphur chasm.

Swiftly and steadily pulling upon the rope, he hauled Mary Marco from the pit.

She was now nearly senseless, but the moment she inhaled the pure, fresh air, she revived.

Without waiting to repossess himself of the rope, Big Horn Ike took her up in his powerful arms, and sped along with her in a direction away from the opening.

"I can walk, now," said the girl, in a few moments. "I feel so much better."

Ike then placed her on her feet, and, taking her arm, hurried her along.

In about an hour he had reached the shore of the little lake in which was the isle, containing the hut. "I will watch near you, fur the varmints arter us may come this way," remarked the hunter.

"No, they will not come this way," answered the girl.

"What makes yer think so?"

"Because they are afraid of the wild-man who haunts the places near here."

"You may be right, gal, but I shall keep a sharp lookout, fur all that. Ef the Injuns is afraid of the wild-man, it's plain that Lorano are not."

Mary now entered her little canoe, which was in a small cove near her, and crossed the lake to the island. Watching her disappear, Ike went to an elevated rock, from which he resolved to keep a lookout, during the night.

Finally the moon rose, lighting up the scenery, but the young hunter beheld no sign of his foes.

CHAPTER XIII.

THE SEARCH.

IN the morning Ike went to the shore of the lake, and watched for the appearance of Mary Marco.

She came at last, looking, he thought, prettier than ever. She had brushed her hair and made some few changes in her apparel from a large valise in the hut, and which contained, among other things, a number of such articles of dress as a female requires.

"How did you pass the night?" inquired Ike. "I hope you slept well, for ye sartintly needed to, arter sech rough exper'ence as you had yesterday."

"I was very comfortable," she answered. "And you?"

"Well, I war awake all night, keeping watch."

"Then you need sleep. Come to my hut and rest yourself, while I keep a lookout."

"No, no; I've no notion of having yer fall into the hands of that varmint, Lorano, again."

"He may not come this way. If I see him, I will awaken you."

"He mou't steal a march on yer. I wouldn't like to trust him."

"But you must have rest," said the girl, kindly. "No one can live without sleep."

"Don't yer worry yerself. Facts is, I've passed many a night 'thout sleep. It don't hurt me, fur I'm used to it, and thar's a good deal in use 'bout anything of that kind."

"But why not sleep as you have the chance?"

"To tell the truth, miss, thar's work before me. Yesterday, as I told you, arter I got into that gully, down the rope Hez had fixed, I heered the cries which may lead to our findin' yer father and brother! It must be that the cry I heerd came from them, though whar they kin be, is more than I kin imagine."

"You are sure you heard them?"

"Yes, gal, shore, as yer stand thar, I heerd cries which seemed to come from the very heart of the mountain!"

"I feel almost certain, then, that it was they who called. They must have become, somehow, shut up in the rock."

"I don't see how that could be, and yet things does look like it."

"Take me to the place!" cried the girl, eagerly.

"P'raps it war better you should stay in the hut. We mou't fall in with Lorano and the Injuns a'in."

"I will risk it! Oh! do let me go with you," she pleaded. "Besides, I think I will be safer with you than anywhere else."

"Well, I don't know but what yer's right," said Ike, much pleased with the compliment.

Mary came across the lake in her canoe, and, as soon as the two had partaken of some of the frugal fare contained in the hunter's wallet, they set out.

Ike this time took a direction which led him round to the other side of the gully, so that he could enter it without having to descend by the line hanging down from the cliff.

"Now, then," said the boy, "I will shout, and, if yer listen, with yer ear against the rock, I think you will hear a reply."

Mary placed her ear to the rock, and Ike called, in a loud voice:

"Halloa! thar, halloa!"

"I hear no response," said the girl.

Again the boy shouted, but with no success.

"It's very strange," he said. "I heard the cry plain enough yesterday."

"It cannot be that they have perished since you heard them?"

"Not likely in sech a short time, unless they are in some hollow in the rock, whar thar's noxious gases or somethin' of that sort."

Mary turned pale.

"I have heard that the mountains about here have been volcanic," she said. "It may be, that, unable to get out, they have been suffocated by some deadly vapor."

"Don't yer worry, gal. Let's hope for the best. P'raps, ef I change my persition, I may git a reply when I holler."

He moved further along by the base of the rock, and called again.

"I think I heard something!" cried the girl, joyfully, "a faint response, apparently far off!"

"Thar's it!" answered Ike, "that's jest the way it worked, yesterday."

"There must be some opening—some way to get into the rock," said Mary.

"I looked all round it, yesterday, but drat me, ef I could find any. It's jest the most mysterious thing I ever heerd on."

Then he looked up toward the summit of the elevation.

"Possibly thar mou't be some hollow, or opening in the top," he remarked, "though ef thar war, it's puzzlin' to tell why them folks in the rock kin not come out."

Searching carefully, he found a ledge, by means of which the twain at last reached the summit of the height. Here the rocks presented the appearance of great masses of lava, which bore some resemblance to huge sponges, fastened together. Except the little holes in these porous masses, however, no sign of an opening could be discovered.

Stooping, Ike again shouted.

Instead of a voice this time he heard the dull report of a rifle, apparently far beneath him.

Mary and the hunter exchanged glances.

"I believe it are yer father and brother, though how on 'arth they got inside o' the rock beats me."

"They will perish, if they are not soon taken out," said the girl. "I know they had but little water with them, and I feel sure there are no springs inside of such a dry, barren rock!"

"Right, gal; they've been thar, now, fur four days."

"Can you think of no way to get them out?" cried Mary, despairingly clasping her hands.

"Onfortunatly I kin not. It would not do to blast the rock, as some big masses mou't tumble down upon 'em and crush 'em."

"Oh! then what shall we do? Must they be left there to perish, and we so near them?"

Ike reflected. All at once, as his gaze was turned downward, he caught sight of a small fragment of red cloth, on a jutting shelf of rock.

"Stay hyar a moment, gal," he said.

With the speed of a deer he descended to the shelf, and picked up the piece of cloth.

"Thar," he cried, bringing it to the girl, "what do yer make out of that?"

"A piece of red silk; it looks as if it had been torn off a sash."

"Jest what I thought. Did yer father or brother wear a sash?"

"No."

"Thar, then we know that the piece of cloth was torn from the sash of that varmint, Lorano."

"Lorano?"

"Yes, gal; and yer kin be shore that he's at the bottom of the mischief."

"You think he has had something to do with my father and brother being shut up in this place?"

"Yes, I do. The mean weasel must hev been watching them. He saw them creep into an opening and get into the cliff; then he sneaked up and closed the opening by cutting the neck of some big fragment of rock over it, like them

you see hanging from the sides of the cliff in many places, and which, all of 'em being solid, it would take fifty men to move."

"Yes, I see many of those rocks, and they look strange enough, being different from the body of the height against which they lay, and from which some of them hang. You think he has caused a heavy rock of this kind to fall over some opening through which my father and brother crawled?"

"Thar's jest it."

"Then, if we could only find that particular rock, we might blast it—might we not?"

"Yes, but the diffikilty are to find the one we are arter."

They tried to discover the rock supposed to be over an opening, but as may be imagined, they were unsuccessful.

"We won't give it up. We'll look, ef it takes us days, until we find it," said Ike. "The sooner we get yer father and brother out, the better," he added, directing an uneasy glance skyward.

Following his look, Mary perceived that the sky was overcast, as if a heavy fall of rain was impending.

"Facts is," continued Ike, "ef thar's hollows in the mountain, which must be the case as yer father and brother hev changed their persition since yesterday, a hard rain mou't fill them same hollows with rushing streams and torrents fur the time, and yer kin know what would happen then."

"Yes, the two would be drowned," said Mary, wringing her hands.

At that moment, as he looked off to the eastward, Ike uttered an exclamation of chagrin and disappointment.

"What is it?" said the girl.

"Injuns!" answered the young hunter, "coming jest at the wrong time, as they always do. I kin see that raskil, Lorano, at their head."

"Then we will have to leave this place," said the girl. "I am sorry, for I hoped we would have all the day to try for some plan to free my father and brother."

"The varmints haven't seen us, yet," remarked the hunter, "and ef we keep ourselves hid, they may not come further, fur they're mou'ty afear'd of that monster wild man, which, I reckon, haunts this part of the mountain, as well as other places."

As he spoke, the rain suddenly came down in torrents, and the savages, evidently seeking shelter, disappeared among the rocks in the distance.

Ike found a sort of hollow in the mountain where his companion and he could keep dry during the shower.

CHAPTER XIV.

A FORLORN HOPE.

THE three persons among the honeycombed chambers of the elevation, spent the rest of the day, after vainly striving to break the rock against the opening, in looking for some place of egress from their quarters. Their search, as usual, however, was unsuccessful, and at night they paused from exhaustion, spreading their blankets, and preparing for slumber.

"What end of a sleeping-place is this?" inquired Hez. "Hope tew gracious I'll git a good nap, for I need it some, I can tell you."

"We generally sleep well here," said Mr. Marco, "if not too well, for the close, confined atmosphere has a stupefying effect."

"I can dew some pretty tall sleeping," remarked the Vermonter, "and you'll have to shake me pretty lively to wake me. I hope my petrified wild-cat won't be dragged off by any critter while I'm in the 'land of Nod,' for I'm really in love with the beauty."

"I don't think there's any danger of that," said Jack. "It's the first animal except a serpent that we've seen since coming here."

Thus reassured, Hez stretched himself out and was soon snoring lustily. He did not awaken until morning, when, after rolling him over and over, his two companions succeeded in arousing him.

"Well, neow, what's the programme for today?" inquired Hez. "Any new ideas?"

"We cannot think very well with our mouths feeling as if they would crack," said Jack. "To tell the truth, we have not had a drop of water to drink for two days."

"And unfortunately, my canteen is empty, tew," remarked Hez, as he turned it upside down. "What on air'h we air tew do for water is more'n I can imagine."

"We must try to think of some way for getting out," said Mr. Marco. "There seems to

be only one way, and that is by blasting the rock over the opening."

"Have you matches?" inquired Hez.

"I have two left in my safe," said Jack.

"And I have one," remarked his father.

"I have none left," said Hez, "which makes exactly three."

"How are we to drill a hole in the rock?" inquired Jack.

"With one of our ramrods," was the reply.

"Can we do it?"

"It will be slow work, but we must make a commencement."

They searched for the rock over the opening by which Hez had entered, but it was a long time ere they succeeded in finding the passage leading to it.

Suddenly Hez pricked up his ears.

"Hark! there's some one calling!" he said.

The others listened, to hear the voice, which was that of Ike Ward, and which was scarcely audible through the intervening walls of rock.

The three simultaneously shouted in response, and the voice was again heard.

Finally Hez discharged his rifle that the person calling might not fail to know that the inside of the elevation was tenanted.

"Now we may as well proceed," said the Vermonter, "and git at eavour work. The voice we heard I guess was that of my friend Ike, and you may be sure that he won't rest without doing all that he can for us."

The three kept on, when all at once they heard a roaring, rushing noise outside, like that of the sea in a storm.

"What on airth is that?" said Hez.

The noise continued, and the three looked at each other in some dismay.

At length a gleam of joy crossed the face of Mr. Marco.

"Thank God!" he said, "it is rain, and we will soon have water to drink."

As he spoke he held out the back of his hand, showing that it was wet with some drops which had found their way through the porous wall.

"Hey, now, that's a jolly good send!" cried Jack.

"It may turn eabout to be a little tew good!" remarked Hez.

"How so?" inquired Mr. Marco.

"Waal, you know that water always seeks its level," answered Hez, "and if it don't come running deaown in big enough quantities for awhile tew level us, then I'll eat sand-stun."

A look of dismay fell upon the faces of his companions, for, even as he spoke, two streams of water came pouring down, as if from a spout upon their heads.

"We'll fill eavour canteens, at any rate," said Hez.

The three soon had a good supply of water, and had quenched their thirst.

"We ought tew git up as high as possible," said Hez. "There'll not be so much danger from the water there as heer."

"Pooh! I don't believe there's any danger after all," said Jack. "The water soaks up too quick."

"Does it? Neaow you just listen," cried Hez, inclining his ear.

A rushing, swashing sound, which all knew was made by an approaching torrent could be heard.

"Heer she comes! Clear the track!" cried Hez, crawling rapidly upward.

His companions followed, when the Vermonter thought of his cat, which he had placed on the floor of the passage.

"Good gracious!" he exclaimed. "I must save my beyooty, which otherwise will be swept away from me tew kingdom come!"

Squeezing past Jack and his father, he made a spring for the dead animal; but soon as he did so, along came the torrent, sweeping with irresistible force and almost filling the passage. Hez was nearly carried off his feet; but Jack, from above, held out his hand to him, and he managed to scramble up to his side.

"There goes that beauty!" cried the Vermonter, despairingly, as the cat's body, caught by the rushing stream, was whirled rapidly off.

"I guess I'll never see it again!"

"Hark! here comes another!" cried Jack.

"Another cat? Hope it's covered with stun, like t'other one—"

"No! no! not a cat—a torrent!" yelled the other boy.

"By the livin' Jerushy! you're right, and it's a pealer, tew! Gol-darn sech a watery beause as this!"

As he spoke, Hez sprung for another narrow passage on the right, but ere he could reach it, the torrent struck him, whirling him down on

his back, with his lengthy legs flying against the low roof. The next moment he must have been dashed senseless against some rocks in the way of the stream, had not Jack caught him by one foot and his father by the other, those two persons having reached a passage on their left. Hauling lustily, they finally dragged the Vermonter up to them, where, after gasping and sputtering he finally regained his breath.

"Waal, neaow, if this isn't abeaout the most provoking place I ever was in, you can skin me for a keawcumber! Good gracious, I dew wish we were eabout of it!"

The clothes of the three were soaked through, for, in addition to the rushing streams, which they heard and saw on many sides of them, a number of water-spouts were continually pouring down upon them.

"Halloa!" continued Hez, after a moment's thoughtful silence, "heaow air the matches?"

Jack took out his match-safe, and found the two in it spoiled by the water. Mr. Marco discovered that his single match was still dry, as he had taken the precaution to wrap the safe in some tarred cloth.

As to the powder carried by the three that being in water-proof pouches, was still in good condition.

The rain continued to pour, and the trio were kept pretty busy shifting their position to escape the torrents, which came rushing toward them.

In a few hours the rain ceased to fall. The torrents became fewer and more shallow every moment, and, finally there was no danger to be apprehended from them.

"Neaow, then, for blasting eaourselves eabout of this blasted place!" cried Hez. "But I dew wish I hadn't lost my beautiful cat."

A search was made for the rock over the opening, which was soon found.

"Let us sheaout again," said Hez, "and if we dew, my friend Ike may heer us, and if he comes this way we can call to him and speak tew him, by which he'll know exactly where we air."

They called, but there was no reply.

"Hark!" said Jack suddenly.

All listened, to hear what appeared to be the faint murmur of many voices afar off.

Then they imagined they caught the dull report of many rifles.

Hez shrugged his shoulders.

"I don't like the looks of things," he said.

"I'm afraid Ike is being attacked by Injuns. Wish to gracious we were eaoutside to help him. Let's git tew work soon as we can."

The end of Jack's ramrod was placed against the rugged barrier, and, with the blunt side of his hatchet, Mr. Marco commenced to pound on the other extremity.

It was slow work, but, at the expiration of several hours, a hole deep enough for blasting had been drilled.

This hole was nearly filled with powder, and a piece of dry paper, taken from a note-book, was then twisted in the form of a wisp and was saturated with powder, slightly dampened.

It was placed in the hole, after which Mr. Marco produced his solitary match.

"Neaow comes the tug of war," remarked Hez. "Dew be careful of that match, squire, as it appears to be eabout only airthly hope!"

Mr. Marco fairly trembled as he selected a dry rock on which to light the match. The eyes of his companions were fixed, as by a sort of fascination, on the little piece of wood. At length the end was carefully scraped against the rock. There was a tiny flame, which looked as if it was undecided whether to enlarge or not.

"Come, neaow, don't go eaout, will ye?" said Hez, apostrophizing the match. "Dew burn, won't ye? You don't kneaow heaow much depends on you—you beautiful little drop of brimstun!"

The blaze grew larger. Mr. Marco bent over to light the wisp, the end of which the flame had nearly touched, when a fine draught of air, coming through a small crevice between the rock and the edge of the opening, suddenly blew it out.

"Oh, darn the thing!" cried Hez, while Jack fairly groaned.

CHAPTER XV. THE ATTACK.

MARY MARCO and her companion, Ike Ward remained in the alcove until the rain ceased to fall. The sun was now shining brightly, and the sky had cleared.

"Do you think the heavy shower we had has really harmed my father and brother?" inquired the girl.

"I kin not say. It did not rain water spouts, thar's a fact, and I could see the water pouring down through the holes on the rocks. I will call and see if there is a reply."

He shouted, but no response came.

"They are drowned!" gasped Mary.

"Don't be too shore of that. They mou't hev escaped in some way. They may be too far from us now to hear my voice. Again we'll go and look fur the rock which I'm pooty shure was let down over an opening by that mean Lorano."

Just then Mary caught his arm.

"Were not those the heads of Indians I saw, peering from among that group of rocks?" she inquired, pointing off to the eastward.

Ike could see nothing of the Indians.

"Are you shore you saw 'em?" he inquired.

"Oh, yes, I could not have been mistaken."

"Wait, hyar, and I'll go to take a nearer look."

He crept down to the base of the hight, and advanced a short distance, when he caught the gleam of a rifle-barrel pointed toward him from a crevice in the rock. He dodged behind a boulder near him, just in time to escape a bullet which chipped off a piece from the rugged mass.

"Right, thar's Injuns thar, shore enough!" he cried, as he made his way back toward the spot where he had left the girl.

To his surprise, she was no longer there.

"Whar are yer?" he called. "For the Lord's sake, gal! yer shouldn't leave this persition now, which are the best one under present circumstances."

There was no response to his call.

"The poor critter hev got frightened and run off," he muttered, despondently—"arter telling me, too, that her best place in danger war with me. I'm afear'd she only said that to cheer me up, and that she didn't mean it in 'arnest!"

The savages, about a dozen in number, headed by Lorano, were now approaching the hight. Knowing, however, that Ike was a dead shot, they kept themselves screened as much as possible by the trees and rocks, on the way.

The young hunter posted himself on a projection of the elevation, which rose like a sort of turret, on one side of the wall. On the top there was a ledge, which would serve him for a breastwork.

Having advanced to within about fifty paces of the rugged tower, the party pressed among some rocky fragments.

Then Lorano stepped boldly forth, but quickly dodged back, as Ike leveled toward him his unerring rifle.

"Hold, therel!" he shouted, thrusting his head from behind the rock. "We don't want to hurt you. All we want is the girl. Give her up to us, and we will not harm a hair of your head!"

"Yer's very kind," answered Ike. "But yer's a dratted fool, as well as a mean skunk, ef yer think I'm the one to give that gal up to yer. All I hev ter say is that I'll defend her long as I kin, and that the moment you or yer party gives me the chance, I'll put a bullet plumb center thro' yer gizzards!"

Lorano uttered a cry of rage, and heading the Indians, who closely followed him, he rushed toward the elevation.

Big Horn Ike took aim, and the ring of his piece smote the air, but the bullet striking the edge of a tree, glanced off, just grazing the villain, and passing through the head of a savage, a little on his left.

Ere the hunter could reload, the party had gained some low rocks, at the base of the elevation. Keeping themselves screened as much as they could, they advanced up the hight. Ike now changed his position to the other side of the precipice, taking his place on a long, projecting rock, whence he could command the only pathway.

An open, unobstructed one leading to the place he occupied. On the way to this place he had been exposed to the rifles and arrows of the savages, which had whizzed about him in showers. Now, however, he was protected by a rocky wall, which formed a good breastwork.

Lorano and his followers hesitated about crossing the open space between them and their foe, who had reloaded his piece and stood ready to fire the moment they should show themselves.

For a long time they remained covered by the rocks. Then the voice of Lorano was heard.

"Why do you stop, chief?" he inquired. "There is but one. Has Talena the heart of a squaw that he and a dozen of his warriors should be kept back by a boy?"

"Talena is not afraid," replied the chief; "but he has been looking for the Mexican Flower, and he has not seen her. What has become of her? It is she he wants, and after he gets her, then he will avenge the braves whom the young white hunter has slain. If we kill him now, he cannot tell us where she is."

"Good!" grunted several of the savages. "Yes, but you can never find out by staying here. You must capture the hunter to learn where she is."

"My brother's talk is well enough, but we are not sure that the boy knows where the girl is. No use of losing one or two more braves for nothing."

"Halloa! there!" called Lorano.

"Halloa thar, yerself!" responded Ike.

"Where is the girl?"

"Does yer think I'm fool enough to tell yer?"

"There! you can see that he knows well enough where Mary is hidden. I'd swear that he has hidden her himself, somewhere about this hight," said Lorano to the chief.

"So it may be. Some of us will look for her, while the rest stay here to see that the boy hunter does not get away."

With a couple of the Indians he commenced to search those parts of the elevation where the girl could have screened herself. The search lasted nearly an hour, but it was unsuccessful, and the chief returned to his party.

"Talena has waited long enough. Now," he said, "we will go to the young hunter and capture him."

The whole band sprung from behind their place of shelter, and were about to rush upon the boy, who had aimed his rifle toward them, and was on the point of pulling the trigger, when, suddenly, the form of the wild man-monster came bounding from behind a rock, on the right, in which direction he had ascended the elevation.

This person springing between Ike and the Indians, waved them back with his arms while, at the same time, he uttered a strange, guttural cry.

The Indians, with cries of awe, turned to flee. "No! no!" cried Lorano, "what are you afraid of? It is only a human being, after all. Get out of the way, there! Go back, where you came from, or I will shoot you through the head!" he added, addressing the creature.

Aiming his carbine, the half-breed was about to fire, when Talena knocked up his arm.

"Must not shoot," he cried. "The medicine of the Apaches say we must not shoot, or whole tribe will be swept away!"

Lorano had pulled trigger, and his bullet flew over the head of the singular being.

"Fool! you have spoiled everything," said the youth, bitterly, as he now followed the retreating Indians.

They were soon at the base of the hight, speeding on.

"You can keep on, if you want to," cried Lorano. "I am going no further."

"Give back the shining stones," said Talena.

"No bring girl—so you not have the stones."

"Better wait. I may get the girl for you, yet."

"Talena then will wait. He will be among the rocks," and, as he spoke, he pointed toward the rugged masses, behind which the party had previously been screened.

"Let it be so," answered Lorano. "I am going to watch that wild-man."

"My brother must not shoot. If he shoot, Talena will take back the stones, whether he get the Mexican Flower or not."

"Very well," sullenly replied the half-breed. "I promise not to shoot him."

The Indians moving on, were soon among the rocks. Lorano hovered about the base of the hight, and finally screened himself behind a rocky mass having a crevice, through which he could watch the wild-man.

CHAPTER XVI.

AN UNEXPECTED DISCOVERY.

AFTER the savages had left the hight, the wild-man confronted Ike.

"Yer've done me a favor—thar's a fact," said the young hunter. "I war goin' to captur' yer, but I don't car' to do that now. Keep back, though, don't yer come too clus'," he added, as the creature advanced toward him.

The other came on, until screened by the rock behind which Ike stood; then he threw off a false wig of tangled black hair, a closely-fitting mask, and a skin robe which covered his person.

A cry of astonishment escaped the boy hunter.

"Mary Marco!" he exclaimed.

It was indeed the girl, who now stood before him in her usual feminine attire, blushing deeply.

"Good Lord! I wouldn't hev believed it!" exclaimed Ike. "Yer's like a b'ar, all at oncet turned into an angel! How on 'arth, and fur what purpose did yer come to disguise yerself?"

"At home I was used to performing in private theatricals. Brother and I would disguise ourselves, and often entertain our friends in this way."

"Fur my part, yer'd entertain me better by appearin' in yer own lovely person!" said Ike.

"Not when you are threatened with death from savages," answered Mary, smiling archly. "When we came out here, I brought with me one of my disguises, thinking it would enable me to keep away any hostile Indians who might venture to these parts, and also such rude white men as might be inclined to molest father and brother."

"Thar yer made a mistake. Yer wild-man disguise war jest the thing that would draw white hunters to yer, out of curiosity, they not bein' superstitious like the Injuns."

"So I discovered, in the case of yourself and your friend. Well, you know now why I left the elevation a short time ago. It was to repair to my hut, and put on my disguise, so as to drive the Indians away, and save your life. It seems that I was just in time."

"Lord bless yer! Yer's got the right sort o' pluck, and, in ev'ry way, yer's jest the sort of gal I like! Ef yer could only l'arn to like me, I would be the happiest coon in this world!"

"I do like you," answered Mary, in a low voice.

"Yes, but not in the way that would suit me best. Sech a rude hunter fellow as me kin not expect that," he added, sadly.

"I honor and respect you!"

"I believe yer do, but yer kin never love me, gal—that's the word, and I may as well open my face at oncet and say it—as I love you!"

As he spoke, his eyes flashed upon her. Their glances met, and, the next moment Mary's little hand was in his own.

"Why pretend otherwise?" she said. "I do love you as—as you love me."

"Well, now!" cried Ike, joyfully, "war thar ever on this 'arth sech a fortunit child as me—to git the love of sech an angel as you? Tell me, gal, will yer be my wife? I sw'ar I will make yer a good husband, or yer kin hev my scalp!"

"I have your heart—that satisfies me!" she answered.

"But will yer marry me, gal?"

"We must ask my father," she replied. "I trust we will yet find him," she added, shyly changing the subject. "I do not think he has been drowned."

Unknown to the two, Lorano, had found a position which afforded him a good view of the young people. He had not been less surprised than Ike to see Mary throw off her disguise, and thus show that it was she who had played the part of the wild-man. With feelings of savage hate, he then witnessed the scene between the couple, and, although he could not hear what was said, it was easy enough to divine, from their manner, the subject of their discourse.

"Were I sure of not hitting her, I would fire on that rascally boy, and shoot him dead!" thought the half-breed. "But never mind, now that I have made this discovery, Talena will no longer hesitate to capture and scalp the fellow! I will go to him at once."

He hurried off, striving to keep himself screened, as he went, from the occupants of the hight.

But Ike had sharp eyes, and it was not long ere he noticed the half-breed creeping along, like a snake, toward the rocks among which the Indians were hidden.

"Thar goes that varmint," he muttered. "I reckon he has seen all that's happened, and is off to tell the reds."

"Then we are lost," said Mary.

"Thar'il be some tall trouble, thar's a fact, ef he reaches that party. The best way is to captur' him, 'fore he gits thar."

"How are you to do that?"

"I reckon I kin do it," answered Ike. "I must hev that varmint in my clutches, so as to force him to tell whar the rock is, which I'm shore he hev put over some openin' in this yere cliff, so that yer father and brother kin not git out."

"You cannot capture him. The savages would see you and shoot you down."

"I'm not so shore of that. He hasn't got

whar they kin see him yet, and I don't mean that he shall, 'fore I hev him."

"No, no! don't venture," pleaded Mary.

"Don't yer worry. I'll soon be back," he answered, and away he went.

Having reached the base of the hight, Ike crept along with wonderful agility, almost on his belly, behind ledges of rock, in order that Lorano, should he look, might not see him.

Thus he contrived to get within a few feet of the half-breed ere the latter had passed round a clump of shrubbery, which would have revealed him to the Indians.

Just then it chanced that Lorano turned, to see the young hunter, but ere he could raise his carbine, Ike sprung upon him like a tiger, with one blow of his rifle on his arm knocking his piece from his grasp.

The half-breed drew his knife and the two rolled over on the ground in a desperate struggle. Big Horn Ike succeeded, after receiving a few slight cuts in wresting the knife from the grasp of his adversary; then seizing him by the throat with an iron grip, he placed the point of his own blade against his breast.

"Surrender! yer varmint! or I'll put the steel through yer!"

"I suppose there is no help for it," answered Lorano, sullenly, his eyes flashing with baffled rage.

"Come on," said his captor.

"Where are you taking me to?"

"I want yer to show me whar yer let down the big rock over the openin' in the cliff, shutting in Mary's father and brother."

"I did nothing of the kind," answered Lorano, feigning surprise. "What put that idea in your head?"

"No use, I want yer to answer my question, and ef yer don't," added Ike, tightening his grasp on the other's collar, "yer's a dead coon, shore as yer's born! I happen to know that yer did shut them tew up in thar, and p'raps yer know what's become of my pard, Hez, too, whom I've not seen since he got down into that farnal gully."

"Upon my word—"

"No—no—that won't do," interrupted Ike.

"Yer must tell me what I ask, or I'll put this through yer!"

And he pricked Lorano's breast with the knife, as he spoke.

"Well, then, I'll do it," answered the prisoner. "As soon as we reach the cliff, I'll show you where I dropped the rock."

They kept on, and, finally, they arrived at the base of the hight.

"We'll have to go up this ledge," said the half-breed, pointing to one in front of them.

"Well, move on," said Ike, letting go his hold of the prisoner, as he walked on in front of him. Meanwhile he kept his rifle pointed at him, answering a stealthy look which Lorano directed toward him, with these words:

"No use, yer kin not escape. Ef yer try it, my bullet goes through yer back!"

But, even as he spoke, a soft, crumbly piece of rock, upon which he stepped, gave way beneath his foot, causing him to stumble, and, ere he could recover his balance, Lorano was prepared to spring from the edge of the ledge to the ground, below—a distance of ten feet.

Ike bounded forward, and tried to clutch him, but, ere he could seize him, away went the agile half-breed, leaping from the rugged platform. Instead of darting forward toward the Indians, he now ran along under overhanging rocks projecting from the side of the hight, and which would hinder the hunter from firing upon him.

A second later, however, Ike was in full chase, but there were so many fragments of rocks scattered along the foot of the elevation, that the fugitive succeeded in dodging out of sight.

CHAPTER XVII.

IKE'S MANEUVER.

IKE searched for Lorano a long time in vain, and he now knew that, after all, the wily half-breed had escaped him.

"He'll git to the Injuns by a roundabout way, and I mout as well be makin' preparations fur what's to come as to spend time lookin' fur him fur nothing," he thought.

He then returned to the place where he had left Mary Marco, who was glad to see him again.

Ike explained what had happened.

"Ef it warn't for you, I wouldn't car' much," he continued, "but the varmints will be upon us in bigger numbers than I kin sarcumvent, and you may fall into their hands arter they kill me. P'raps you better go back to yer hut."

"No, besides I would not have time, for here they come, now, with Lorano at their head, and they would be sure to see me. Do you know what I have been doing since I saw you capture Lorano?"

"I kin not guess."

Mary pointed to her silken handkerchief waving from a spur of rock, on the edge of the cliff screened by the ridge behind which the two stood and which concealed the bit of cloth from the gaze of the advancing party.

"Why did yer put that thar?"

"Because I saw a band of persons in the distance, and if I am not mistaken, they are white people. They are now out of sight, hidden by the cliffs, but I am in hopes that they have seen my signal, and are coming this way. I waved it to them before I hung it where it is."

"That war a good idea. I hope they saw it—that is ef they're whites, but you've got to be pooty shore 'bout that in these yere diggin's, as the critters mout hev been a party of Navajoes which are not much better nor the Apaches."

"I have good eyes—"

"And pooty ones, too," interrupted Ike.

"Oh, Ike, this is no time for compliments. I was going to say that I have good eyes, and feel quite sure that all the people I saw carried rifles, which would not have been the case were they Indians, who are mostly armed with shields and spears."

"Thar yer's right, though rifles hev got common 'mongst the reds of late."

"Suppose we go to meet those people, and get them to help us. I hope they have seen my signal; but of course I am not sure."

"The varmints would see us, and they'd soon overtake us. Hyar they come, now, and I must look fur a better persition than the one we are on."

He then made his way with the girl to a rock which bulged out from the rugged wall, and on which there was a ledge. From behind this he could fire upon his enemies, who could approach him only from one side, and who to do this would be obliged to squeeze through a narrow passage.

The savages, headed by Talena and accompanied by Lorano, ascended the hight, and advanced, yelling and whooping, toward the narrow passage.

"Down, gal!" cried the boy, "you jest crouch behind the ledge, while I do the best I kin for yer!"

As he spoke he aimed his piece at the foremost Indian, and fired.

With a grunt the man fell over on his side, shot through the heart.

Before a second Indian could work his way through the passage, he had reloaded, and up went his rifle for another shot.

On seeing the deadly weapon pointed toward him, the Indian drew back.

"Cl'ar out, yer varmints!" shouted Ike. "This place are 'Fort Invincible,' and by the 'tarnall I'll hev the life of ev'ry nigger that tries to come hyar!"

"Curse him!" cried Lorano, "he has chosen a good position, and has the best of us. Only one of us at a time can squeeze through the passage, and it's certain death to the one that does it."

"My brother is right," answered the chief. "Talena does not want to see all his braves killed for nothing."

A 'talk' was held, and Lorano soon had a plan to propose.

"The white girl's father and brother are inside of the cliff," he said. "I know they are there, for I saw them crawl in through a hole several days ago, and I shut them up in there by chopping away the stem which held a big rock above the opening. Then the rock fell over it, and closed it up."

"How does my brother know they are still alive, and, if they are, what is his plan?"

"It is for some of us to pull away the rock, and then hide ourselves. After a while the father and brother of the girl, and another person whom I also shut up in the cliff, will come out. Let all be tomahawked and scalped except the girl's father. Then we will tell the girl that unless she comes to us we will also kill her father."

"But the white hunter will not let her go."

"She will go a few steps, it is likely, before he can prevent her. Then let a brave, who stands ready behind the narrow passage, shoot down the boy."

"My brother thinks the girl will jump over the ridge to come to us when she sees us with her father?"

"It would be natural for her to do that. Even if she does not, it is likely that the white

hunter will, in his excitement, forget himself so as to expose his form to the rifle of the brave behind the passage."

"Ugh!" grunted Talena, shrugging his shoulders. "I am not sure that it will turn out as my brother says, but we can try his plan. It will do no hurt to try it."

Accordingly, one of the best shots of the party having been left behind the rugged projection near the passage, the others followed Lorano to the ledge, upon which was the heavy rock closing the opening through which Jack and his father had entered the cliff.

By prying upon the mass with large pieces of wood, which served in lieu of crowbars, the Indians endeavored to move it. For some time all their efforts were in vain. At last, however, they succeeded in moving the rock to the edge of the ledge.

"Now, then," said Lorano, "one more good shove, and away it goes!"

The club-like pieces of wood were again used, and, with a thundering crash, down went the mass of rock, rolling from the ledge to the ground below.

Mary and Ike heard the noise.

"What was that?" inquired the girl.

"The Lord only knows. Them varmints must hev left the passage, and are up to something. I must go to see what it is."

"No, no, don't leave this place, I beg of you!" cried Mary, in alarm.

"Don't yer worry. I'll be car'ful! It's likely thar's an Injun left near the passage to watch us, but yer'll see how nicely I'll sarcumvent him!"

As he spoke, Ike showed himself above his rocky breastwork, which he had scarcely done, when he saw a rifle pointed toward him through the passage. As the piece was fired, he dropped quickly behind the ridge, to hear the bullet whistle past, close to his head.

"Thar's only one of the varmints thar, but that shot will draw t'others to the place," he said. "Before they come, I'll hev a chance to see what they've been up to!"

Having concealed Mary in a hollow in the ridge, and placed some rocky fragments over the opening, he sprung across the breastwork, and rushed quickly to the passage.

The Indian who had fired had just reloaded his piece, and was about to aim it again at the young hunter, when the latter shot him through the head.

Squeezing through the passage, he advanced to the edge of the cliff, and looked down.

To his surprise, he saw no sign of a savage.

"Whar kin they be?" he muttered, as he climbed a short distance down the cliff.

Then he beheld the opening which had been left by the dislodgment of the rock that had been over it.

In an instant he comprehended that all the savages, with Lorano, had crawled through the aperture, into the cliff.

"The mean varmint! I reckon I kin see through him," he thought. "He wants to bring out Mary's father and brother, and, by threatening to have 'em killed by the Injuns, unless she gives herself up, force her to surrender herself a prisoner!"

Creeping through the opening into one of the low-roofed passages, he listened.

Then he distinctly heard the disguised voice of Lorano, not far off.

"Where are you, my friends? We have found out that you were shut up in here, and have come to rescue you," shouted the half-breed.

There was no response.

"I'm afeared they were drowned during the rain," thought Ike, as he glanced about him at the damp walls and the puddles of water in little hollows on the floor.

Again the half-breed shouted, and this time he heard a faint reply afar off.

"They're alive!" he commented mentally.

"And now I must save 'em, if I kin. I must try to git to them 'fore the Injuns do, and warn 'em of the trick in store for 'em. As to the gal, she's safe enough whar she are, I hope, until I come out ag'in. Ef she knew how things war, she'd advise me to save her father and brother."

CHAPTER XVIII.

CONCLUSION.

"TRY your matches," said Jack's father to his son, after his failure to light the wisp, by means of which he had intended to blast the rock.

"No go," answered the boy, as he produced the matches and vainly endeavored to light them.

"Waal, neaow, we certainly air in a bad fix!" cried Hez. "There's only one hope, which is that eaour friend Ike may find some way to git us eaout."

By the noise of the firing which they had faintly heard in the distance, they judged that Ike was having a hard time of it with the Indians.

"He'll probably be killed," said Mr. Marco, "and then our last hope will be gone."

"It ain't so easy to kill Ike. He has as many lives as a cat," remarked Hez.

Hour after hour passed, when again the report of a rifle was heard.

"Let us shout," said Jack.

"No," answered Hez. "The Injuns would heer us, and they'd soon be here after us. It's hard tew tell what we air tew do, placed as we air between the fryin'-pan and the fire."

The three continued to converse in low voices, when, all at once, Hez pricked up his ears.

"If I didn't heer some one holler then you can b'ile me for a codfish," he said.

The three listened, to hear a shout in the distance.

"Thank God! we are saved!" cried Mr. Marco.

They responded to the shout, which they doubted not came from Ike. Then they tried to move in the direction of the voice.

The latter was repeated, as if to guide them, and they knew they were going toward it, but very gradually, owing to the many turns of the labyrinths through which they moved. As they approached, they would now and then call, so that each party was thus enabled to form some idea of the location of the other.

Suddenly Hez, who had drawn himself up against the low roof, to peer through an opening before him, saw, not far ahead, the gleaming of fiery eyeballs in the gloom of the hollow passages.

"Hist!" he whispered, dropping down to the side of his companions. "It 'pears tew me that things air not exactly right ahead."

"What do you mean?" inquired Jack.

"Waal, I don't know, but if the folks yander air white people, I must own they have uncommon bright eyes for sech. I have jest seen their eyes!"

"Of course their eyes would shine in the darkness. There is nothing strange in that," answered Mr. Marco. "Come, we lose time by stopping here."

"Better lose time than eaour scalps," said Hez. "I'm afraid that it's Injuns ahead, and that the call was tew draw us intew a trap."

"Pooh! I'll risk it," said the other.

He crept on, followed by Jack, and more slowly by Hez, who kept a finger on the trigger of his rifle.

All at once a dark form emerged from behind a rocky column near one of the passages, and a hand fell upon Mr. Marco's arm.

"Stop, fur yer life!" was whispered by the new-comer. "Thar's 'bout a dozen Injuns ahead, waitin' to pounce on yer!"

Mr. Marco could dimly see in the gloom the form of the speaker, whose hunter garb he did not fail to notice.

At the same moment Hez came up, and at once recognized his friend, Big Horn Ike.

"Well neaow!" he whispered, "I'm glad to see you again—there's a fact. Heaow on airth did you git intew this box?"

"Follow me," answered Ike. "You hev not a moment to lose ef yer'd escape the Injuns, which are in this honeycomb rock, not more'n fifty paces off."

"Heaow did the man-critters git in?—that's what puzzles me, as we feaound it impossible to git eaout."

"By moving away a rock over the opening, through which Mr. Marco and his son crept into the cliff."

"But heaow did they know we were heer?"

"Lorano, who is with them, told them that he had cut away the rock, so as to make it fall over the opening."

"The darned weasel! If I get hold of him, I will make him sorry for giving us so much trouble and tribulation."

"So that fellow is the cause of our being shut up in here?" said Mr. Marco. "He also must have stopped up the entrance through which Hez came in."

"There can be no deaoubt of that neaow," said Hez.

"I'm goin' to try to sarcumvent the varmints," whispered Ike. "Follow me!"

As he spoke, he crawled into a narrow passage branching off from the one he had entered. His companions kept behind him, and soon the

four had proceeded many yards, when Ike paused.

Not far off, he saw the gleaming eyes of a savage, who had evidently caught sight of the party.

"Thar's an Injun ahead," whispered the young hunter. "He has been put thar, I reckon, to keep watch on that side so that we couldn't git around the varmints, and crawl out, 'thout their knowin' it, which is jest what I'm arter."

"What can we do, now?" said Mr. Marco. "He'll give the alarm."

"No he won't. You jest wait hyar, while I creep for'ard."

As he spoke, getting down, almost on his belly, he began to draw himself along, the shadows falling upon him concealing him from the gaze of the watchful Apache.

When he was within a few feet of the savage, Big Horn Ike suddenly sprung forward, clutching him so tightly by the throat that he could make no noise. Taken thus by surprise, the Indian reeled sideways: then he raised his tomahawk to brain his enemy, but ere the weapon could descend, Ike, who had drawn his knife with his disengaged hand, slid the weapon between the ribs of his dusky foe, killing him instantly. He then returned to his friends, who had crept up to within a few feet of him.

"The varmint is done for," he said. "The opening is not far from hyar, and, ef nothin' more happens, we kin git to it 'thout t'other Injuns knowin' it."

"Where are the others?" inquired Jack. "They're movin' on further into the cliff. Hark! now yer kin tell 'bout whar they are."

A voice was again heard shouting to the white occupants of the rocky labyrinths.

"Good! they are far behind us!" said Mr. Marco.

"Yes, and ef I are not mistook, the chap callin' are that mean varmint, Lorano! He thinks you are ahead of him."

"We must hurry," said Jack, "or when he finds there is no answer to his call, he will begin to suspect something."

"Thar's a fact. Come on, and we'll soon be out of this hole."

"I'm so sorry I lost my cat," remarked Hez. "That beauty would have made my fortune."

He went on to explain about the animal to Ike.

"I reckon yer couldn't hev done much with it. Yer'd hev had to stuff it, and then the crumbly stone about it would hev dropped off, leavin' the critter in its nat'ral state."

"Why, darn it, don't you know I could hev fastened some more of the stun to it?"

"Yer kin do that to any cat."

"Posseribly, but wild-cats air not common abeaout this part of the country."

"Yer's right, thar."

"Do you see the opening, yet?" inquired Mr. Marco.

"Yes, thar's a faint glimmer of light, ahead. We'll soon be thar, now."

They kept on, to finally emerge from the opening.

The there who had been so long among the gloomy labyrinths, drew a deep sigh of relief, as they breathed the fresh air and looked round them at the sunshine and the wild scenery.

Whoops and yells were now heard in the cliffs.

"The raskils hev guessed the trick we've played 'em," said Ike, "and are makin' fur the entrance. Thar's about twelve on 'em, but as only one at a time kin come out, I reckon we have the best on 'em!"

Peering into the passage, the speaker soon saw the dusky line of savages, with Lorano at their head, approaching.

"Stay whar yer are!" shouted Ike, "fur the present. Yer's the same as our pris'ners now. The first that tries to come out gits a bullet in him!"

The savages then paused and became silent. At length the murmur of their voices indicated that they were having a 'talk.'

"Better take your head eabout of there," said Hez to the young hunter. "The first thing you know, you'll have some pewter or an arrow in you."

Even as he spoke the report of Lorano's carbine was heard, and a bullet, narrowly missing Ike's forehead, grazed his skull.

Before the boy could aim his rifle his foes had disappeared by creeping off into another passage.

"It's my candid opinion," said Hez. "that the hull darned rabble of 'em air going to try to git eabout of the entrance on the other side. There air enough of 'em to push away the rock that closes it up."

"Yes, ef they could all git at it," answered Ike, "but in sech a narrer place it will be onposserble, I reckon, fur 'em to do it. One on us, though, had better keep watch on that side."

"I will go there," said Jack. He moved around the cliff, and took a position there.

Scarcely had he done so, when there was a yell of triumph, and three dusky forms sprung suddenly from the opening, by which stood Ike and his companions.

"The cunnin' raskils!" cried Ike, as the trio raised their tomahawks, "they've got to the entrance by a different way from what we came."

As he spoke, he shot down one of the savages, while Hez and Mr. Marco each served another in the same manner.

But the time, brief as it was, which it had taken to do this, had enabled half a dozen of the rest of the fierce party to come out, with Lorano among the foremost.

"This way!" shouted Ike, as he sprung behind a rocky ridge, on the rugged platform.

Hez and Mr. Marco were, in an instant by his side, and the three rapidly commenced to reload their rifles.

Lorano, followed by several of the Indians, sprung upon the rocky breastwork.

"Now I have you," he cried, fiercely, to Ike.

The latter had just loaded his piece, but it seemed as if he must be shot ere he could aim it, as the half-breed's carbine was pointed full at his forehead, against which the muzzle almost rested.

At that critical instant the sharp ring of a rifle was heard not far off, and Lorano, just as he was about to fire, reeled, dropped his weapon and fell stone dead on the outside of the ridge.

The boyish voice of Jack was then heard not far off.

"I've settled that 'beat' at last! There's an end to the varmint!"

"Quick!" came another voice, which was recognized as that of Mary Marco—"quick, my friends, or they will be lost, after all."

This was followed by a hoarser cry, a rifle volley, and yells of rage from the baffled savages, as they took to their heels.

Mr. Marco and Hez, having parried with their pieces the tomahawks which had been hurled at them by the two Indians who had leaped with Lorano to the top of the breastwork, now followed Big Horn Ike as he sprung over the ridge.

"Halloa! by the 'tarnal!" cried the young hunter, "hyar's pards come to help us, jest at the right time!"

A party of twenty sturdy hunters, with Mary Marco and Jack running on ahead of them, were seen advancing.

A few minutes later, while Ike was heartily shaking hands with the new-comers, Mary fell on her father's breast, with a cry of joy at finding him safe and unharmed.

"We seed' yer signal," said one of the hunters to Ike, "and thinkin' somethin' was wrong, we comed up fast as we could over the diffikilt rocks and other places in our way. At last we saw the gal wavin' the signal fur us to hurry up, arter which she comed to meet us and lead us the right way."

"Waal," said Hez, "I calkelate eabout troubles air neow at an end, and I can streak it for hum' fast as a 'crockerdile' on stilts."

"There is no need of our remaining in these parts longer," said Mr. Marco, aside, to Jack. "We have a good haul of precious stones in the hut, besides what we have with us. At some future time we will come out here again."

A few hours later, accompanied by Ike Ward, Mr. Marco and Jack went with Mary to the hut on the island in the lake. Having procured their treasures, consisting of many thousands of dollars' worth of garnets, rubies and sapphires, and packed them all in a leather bag, father and son were ready to start with Mary on their return home. Ike parted with them on the borders of Mexico, after having received a warm invitation, seconded by Mary's bright eyes, to soon visit them.

This he did not neglect to do, and in course of time, the girl, with her father's consent, became the promised bride of the gallant young hunter, Ike Ward.

Meanwhile Hezekiah Helper, who had accompanied the party which had rescued him and his friends, and who were going to Salt Lake City, safely reached that place with them, after which he took a homeward train. He eventually arrived in his native state, and started his show, which proved a decided success.

Although he had not been able to persuade any warlike savage to go with him, for exhibi-

tion, yet he had succeeded in 'picking up' a Chinese boy, whom he made to serve his purpose. This boy, dressed in the garb of a fierce Indian chief, he palmed off upon the public as an Apache, whom he had vanquished in combat, and afterward had induced to give up his wild life and become the friend of his conqueror.

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- 305 Dashaway, of Dakota; or, A Western Lad in the Quaker City.
- 324 Ralph Ready, the Hotel Boy Detective.
- 341 Tony Thorne, the Vagabond Detective.
- 353 The Reporter-Detective; or, Fred Flyer's Blizzard.
- 367 Wide-Awake Joe; or, A Boy of the Times.
- 379 Larry, the Leveler; or, The Bloods of the Boulevard.
- 403 Firefly Jack, the River-Rat Detective.
- 423 The Lost Finger; or, The Entrapped Cashier.
- 428 Fred Flyer, the Reporter Detective.
- 432 Invincible Logan, the Pinkerton Ferret.
- 456 Billy Brick, the Jolly Vagabond.
- 466 Wide-Awake Jerry, Detective; or, Entombed Alive.
- 479 Detective Dodge; or, The Mystery of Frank Hearty.
- 488 Wild Dick Racket.
- 501 Boots, the Boy Fireman; or, Too Sharp for the Sharper.
- 566 The Secret Service Boy Detective.
- 596 Jimmy the Kid; or, A Lamb Among Wolves.

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- 5 Vagabond Joe, the Young Wandering Jew.
- 13 The Dumb Spy.
- 27 Antelope Abe, the Boy Guide.
- 31 Kenel-Knife, the Prince of the Prairies.
- 41 Lasso Jack, the Young Mustang.
- 53 The Border King; or, The Secret Fox.
- 71 Delaware Dick, the Young Ranger Spy.
- 74 Hawk-eye Harry, the Young Trapper Ranger.
- 88 Rollo, the Boy Ranger.
- 134 Sure Shot Seth, the Boy Rifleman.
- 148 Scar-Face Saul, the Silent Hunter.
- 146 Silver Star, the Boy Knight.
- 153 Eagle Kit, the Boy Demon.
- 163 Little Texas, the Young Mustang.
- 178 Old Solitary, the Hermit Trapper.
- 182 Little Hurricane, the Boy Captain.
- 202 Prospect Pete; or, The Young Outlaw Hunter.
- 208 The Boy Hercules; or, The Prairie Tramps.
- 218 Tiger Tom, the Texas Terror.
- 224 Dashing Dick; or, Trapper Tom's Castle.
- 228 Little Wildfire, the Young Prairie Nomad.
- 238 The Parson Detective; or, The Little Ranger.
- 243 The Disguised Guide; or, Wild Raven, the Ranger.
- 260 Dare-Devil Dan, the Young Prairie Ranger.
- 272 Minkskin Mike, the Boy Sharpshooter.
- 290 Little Foxfire, the Boy Spy.
- 300 The Sky Demon; or, Rainbolt, the Ranger.
- 334 Whip-King Joe, the Boy Ranchero.
- 409 Hercules; or, Dick, the Boy Ranger.
- 417 Webfoot Mose, the Tramp Detective.
- 423 Baby Sam, the Boy Giant of the Yellowstone.
- 444 Little Buckskin, the Young Prairie Centaur.
- 457 Wingedfoot Fred; or, Old Polar Sam.
- 463 Tamarac Tom, the Big Trapper Boy.
- 473 Old Tom Rattler, the Red River Epidemic.
- 482 Stonewall Bob, the Boy Trojan.
- 562 Blundering Basil, the Hermit Boy Trapper.

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- 23 Nick o' the Night; or, The Boy Spy of '76.
- 37 The Hidden Lodge; or, The Little Hunter.
- 47 Nightingale Nat; or, The Forest Captains.
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- 82 Kit Harefoot, the Wood-Hawk.
- 94 Midnight Jack; or, The Boy Trapper.
- 106 Old Frosty, the Guide; or, The White Queen.
- 123 Kiowa Charley, the White Mustang.
- 139 Judge Lynch, Jr.; or, The Boy Vigilante.
- 155 Gold Trigger, the Sport; or, The Girl Avenger.
- 169 Tornado Tom; or, Injun Jack from Red Cora.
- 188 Ned Temple, the Border Boy.
- 198 Arkansaw; or, The Queen of Fate's Revenge.
- 207 Navajo Nick, the Boy Gold Hunter.
- 215 Captain Bullet; or, Little Tonknot's Crusade.
- 231 Plucky Phil; or, Rosa, the Red Jerebel.
- 241 Bill Bravo; or, The Roughs of the Rockies.
- 255 Captain Apollo, the King-Pin of Bowle.
- 267 The Buckskin Detective.
- 279 Old Winch; or, The Buckskin Desperadoes.
- 294 Dynamite Dan; or, The Bowie Blade of Cochetopa.
- 302 The Mountain Detective; or, The Trigger Bar Bully.
- 316 Old Eclipse, Tramp Card of Arizona.
- 326 The Ten Pardis; or, The Terror of Take-Notice.
- 336 Big Benson; or, The Queen of the Lasso.
- 345 Pitiless Matt; or, Red Thunderbolt's Secret.
- 356 Cool Sam and Part; or, The Terrible Six.
- 366 Velvet Foot, the Indian Detective.
- 386 Captain Outlaw; or, The Buccaneer's Girl Fox.
- 396 Rough Rob; or, The Twin Champions of Blue Blazes.
- 411 The Silken Lasso; or, The Rose of Ranch Robla.
- 418 Felix Fox, the Boy Spotter.
- 425 Texas Trump, the Border Rattler.
- 436 Phil Flash, the New York Fox.
- 445 The City Vampire; or, Red Rolfe's Pigeon.
- 461 One Against Fifty; or, The Last Man of Keno Bar.
- 470 The Boy Shadow; or, Felix Fox's Hunt.
- 477 The Excelsior Sport; or, The Washington Spotter.
- 499 Single Sight, the One-Eyed Sport.
- 502 Branded Ben, the Night Ferret.
- 512 Dodger Dick, the Wharf-Spy Detective.
- 521 Dodger Dick's Best Dodge.
- 528 Fox and Falcon, the Bowery Shadows.
- 538 Dodger Dick, the Dock Ferret.
- 543 Dodger Dick's Double; or, The Rival Boy Detectives.
- 553 Dodger Dick's Desperate Case.
- 563 Dodger Dick, the Boy Videocq.
- 573 The Two Shadows.
- 582 Dodger Dick's Drop.
- 594 Little Lon, the Street-Singer Detective.

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- 7 The Flying Yankee; or, The Ocean Outcast.
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- 62 The Shadow Ship; or, The Rival Lieutenants.
- 75 The Boy Drnellist; or, The Cruise of the Sea-Wolf.
- 102 Dick Dead-Eye, the Boy Smuggler.
- 111 The Sea-Devil; or, The Midshipman's Legacy.
- 116 The Russian Captain; or, The Hermit of Hell Gate.
- 197 Little Grit; or, Bessie, the Stock-Tender's Daughter.
- 204 Gold Plume; or, The Kid-Glove Sport.
- 216 Blon Bill, the Prince of the Reins.
- 222 Grit, the Bravo Sport; or, The Woman Trailer.
- 229 Crimson Kate; or, The Cowboy's Triumph.
- 237 Lone Star, the Cowboy Captain.
- 245 Merle, the Middy; or, The Freelance Heir.
- 250 The Midshipman Mutineer; or, Brandt, the Buccaneer.
- 264 The Floating Feather; or, Merle Monte's Treasure Island.
- 269 The Gold Ship; or, Merle, the Condemned.
- 276 Merle Monte's Cruise; or, The Chase of "The Gold Ship."
- 280 Merle Monte's Fate; or, Pearl, the Pirate's Bride.
- 284 The Sea Marauder; or, Merle Monte's Pledge.
- 287 Billy Blue-Eyes, the Boy Rover of the Rio Grande.
- 304 The Dead Shot Dandy; or, Benito, the Boy Bugler.
- 308 Keno Kit; or, Dead Shot Dandy's Double.
- 314 The Mysterious Marauder; or, The Boy Bugler's Long Trail.
- 377 Bonodel, the Boy Rover; or, The Flagless Schooner.
- 383 The Indian Pilot; or, The Search for Pirate Island.
- 387 Warpath Will, the Boy Phantom.
- 398 SeaWolf, the Boy Lieutenant.
- 402 Isador, the Young Conspirator; or, The Fatal League.
- 407 The Boy Insurgent; or, The Cuban Vendetta.
- 412 The Wild Yachtsman; or, The War-Cloud's Cruise.
- 429 Duncan Dare, the Boy Refugee.
- 433 A Cabin Boy's Luck; or, The Corsair.
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- 446 Haphazard Harry; or, The Scapegrace of the Sea.
- 450 Wizard Will; or, The Boy Ferret of New York.
- 454 Wizard Will's Street Scouts.
- 462 The Born Guide; or, The Sailor Boy Wanderer.
- 468 Neptune Ned, the Boy Coaster.
- 474 Flora; or, Wizard Will's Vagabond Pard.
- 483 Ferrets Afloat; or, Wizard Will's Last Case.
- 487 Nevada Ned, the Revolver Ranger.
- 495 Arizona Joe, the Boy Pard of Texas Jack.
- 497 Buck Taylor, King of the Cowboys.
- 508 The Royal Middy; or, The Shark and the Sea Cat.
- 507 The Hunted Midshipman.
- 511 The Outlawed Middy.
- 520 Buckskin Bill, the Comanche Shadow.
- 525 Brothers in Buckskin.
- 530 The Buckskin Bowers.
- 535 The Buckskin Rovers.
- 540 Captain Ku-Klux, the Marauder of the Rio.
- 545 Lieutenant Lee, the Son of Lafitte.
- 550 Lafitte's Legacy; or, The Avenging Son.
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- 560 Pawnee Bill, the Prairie Shadower.
- 565 Kent Kingdom, the Card King.
- 570 Camille, the Card Queen.
- 575 The Surgeon-Scout Detective.
- 580 The Outcast Cadet; or, The False Detective.
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- 597 The Young Texan Detective.
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- 607 The Rover Detective; or, Keno Kit's Champions.

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- 68 Border Robin Hood; or, The Prairie Rover.
- 158 Fanny Frank of Colorado; or, The Trapper's Trust.

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